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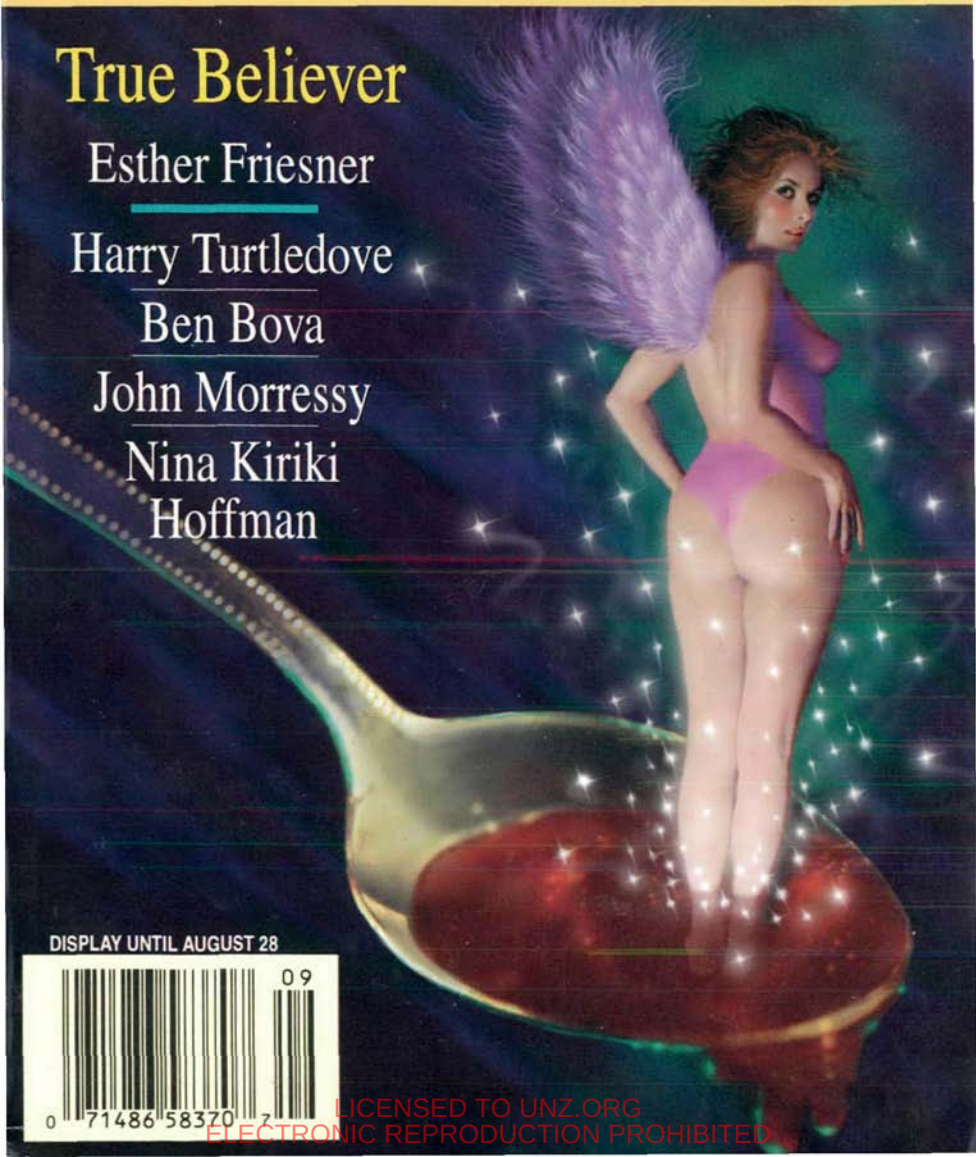

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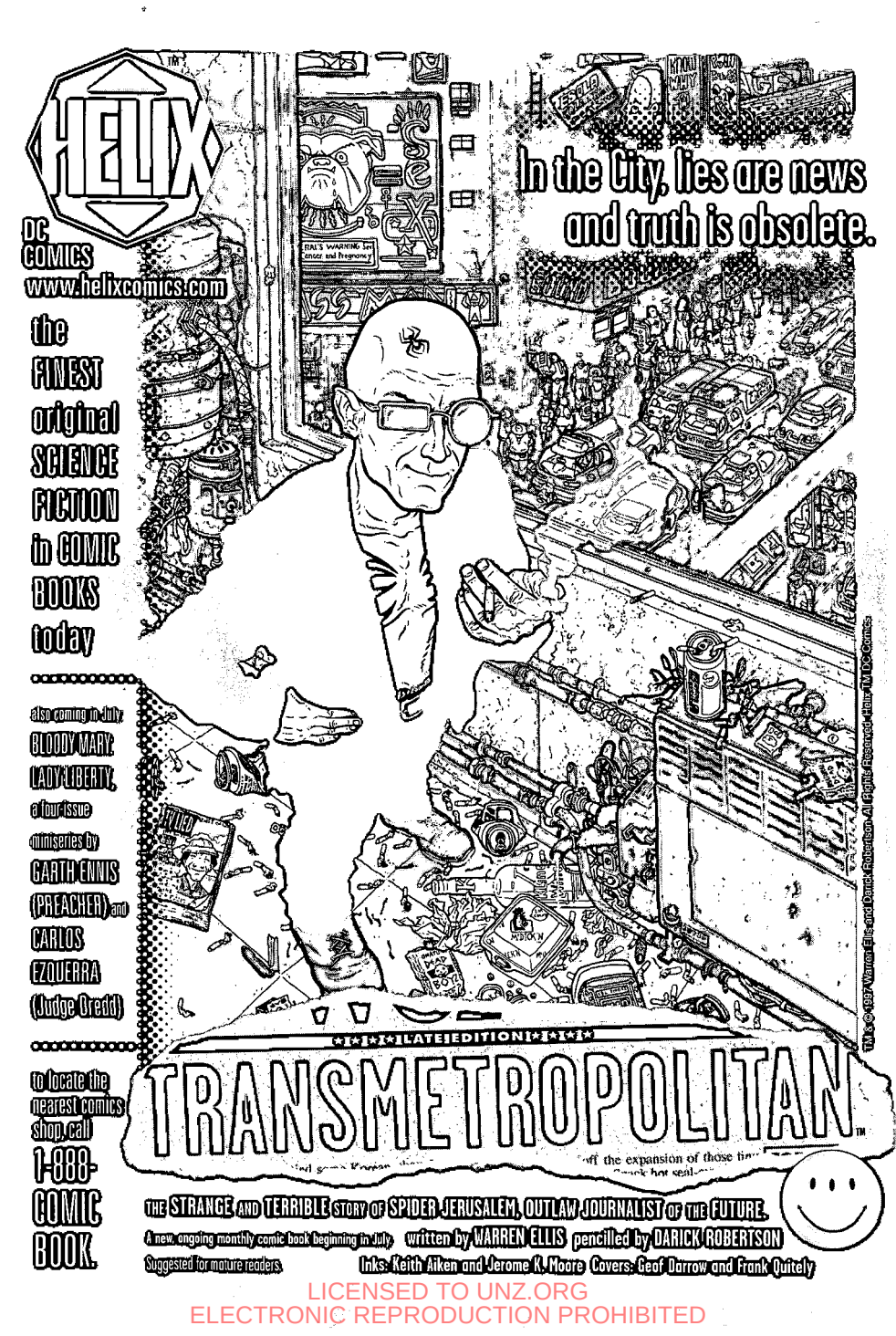
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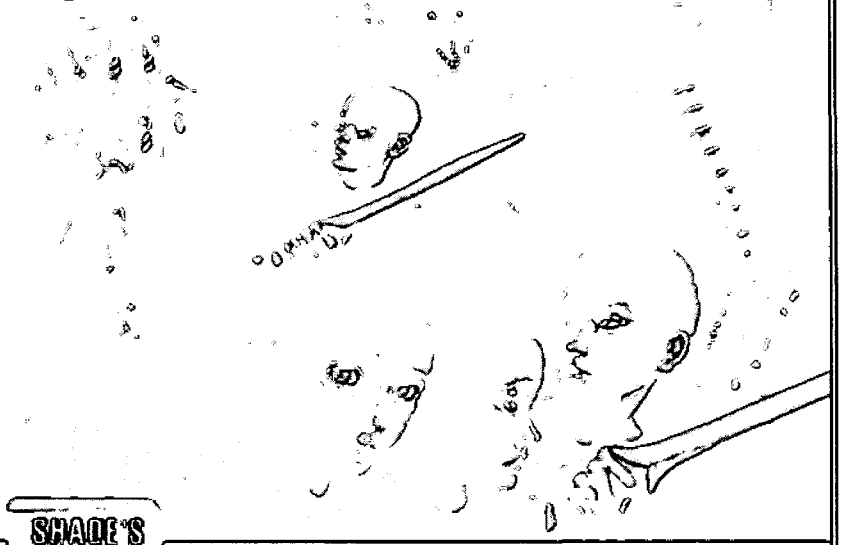

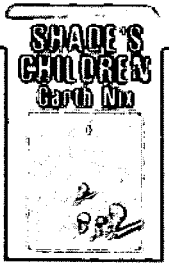

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"A spoonful of sugar," sang Mary Poppins, "helps the medicine go down." But while it's rare, there are occasions when perhaps it's better not *to take the medicine, such as the following case of an eight-year-old boy who doesn't know what his pharmacist has in store for him....*

Esther Friesner is the very funny author of sixty short stories and two dozen novels. She lives in Connecticut and clearly knows a thing or two about rodents and children.

True Believer

By Esther M. Friesner

"AW, *MOMMMMM*, DO I *haaaaaave* to?" Jimmy Hanson screwed his mouth shut and made a prune-face, prunes being the only thing he hated more than medicine. (He had even told his parents that prunes were an alien plot by the Toad-Men of Skraax to take over the minds of Earthlings before the invasion, human minds being just so much Silly Putty to the aforesaid Toad-Men, or so the latest issue of *Captain Hamster and the Frenzies* said. For some reason his parents remained unconvinced.)

Mrs. Hanson stood at her son's bedside, calmly pouring out a dose of thick cola-colored glop into a tablespoon. "Yes, you have to," she said. She placed the open bottle on Jimmy's nightstand and gave him a no-nonsense-now look. The spoon of doom swooped down to the boy's lips. "So open up."

It was the direct approach, and Mrs. Hanson knew it was doomed to fail. Still, every time the hour struck for Jimmy's medication, she went through this little charade for form's sake. It was rather like the way Mr.

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Hanson suggested a just-the-two-of-us trip to the movies on nights when he wanted a conjugal right or two.

In point of fact, Jimmy not only did not open up, he clamped both hands over his mouth and glared at his mother. Mrs. Hanson shook her head: Why did she even bother? Time for a little bribery. "Jimmy, darling, while I was out I bought you a nice present. You can have it just as soon as you take your medicine."

"Whi'zit?" Jimmy inquired suspiciously from behind his self-imposed gag.

"It's the very newest issue of your favorite comic book, that's what."

Slowly the hands lowered. Jimmy sat up a little straighter in bed and declared, "Huh-*uh*. Can't be. I already *got* the May issue of *Captain Hamster and the Frenzies.*" To prove his point, he snatched up one of the two dozen comic books bestrewing the counterpane and held it so that his mother might see its garish cover and know herself to be caught and shamed in a lie. It was no mere coincidence that he likewise held the book so that it effectively blocked his mouth against any sneak attacks of the maternal spoon.

"Yes dear, I know, but that's not the one I bought for you." Mrs. Hanson was beginning to lose patience. She had not been as gently raised as Jimmy and it was an effort for her to maintain an air of sweet reason when all her instincts clamored to drop negotiations and simply scream *Look, you spoiled little yard ape, I've already missed ten minutes of* General Hospital. *If you don't want to wind up doing a guest shot there, you swallow this stuff now!*

However, Mrs. Hanson's whole experience of marriage and maternity had been the triumph of pop-psych and theory-of-the-moment over instinct and gut-reaction. Therefore when a skeptical Jimmy demanded to see proof that his mother had indeed purchased a newer edition of *Captain Hamster,* she complied without demur. Setting the filled spoon down carefully atop Jimmy's chest of drawers on her way out of the room, she returned in jig time with the comic in question. "See?" she said from the doorway.

"That doesn't look like *Captain Hamster,*" Jimmy challenged. "Anyway, Daddy just brought me this issue last night."

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"Daddy buys you all your comics at the newsstand across from his office downtown. Maybe they don't have the latest issue."

"Oh yeah? He said he bought this one at CVS in the mall!"

"Darling, it says *Captain Hamster and the Frenzies* right here on the cover, and it says June too. Maybe they changed artists. Besides, I didn't buy this at a newsstand *or* CVS. I bought it at a genuine comic book store."

"The kind you won't let me go in." Jimmy's brow was knit with the pain of past civil wrongs done him in the name of parental judgment calls. At eight years old he couldn't spell *censorship* but he could tell it when he saw it, all right. "The kind *you* don't go in either. How come you did?"

Mrs. Hanson sighed and patiently explained, "When I went out to fill your prescription, my car broke down before I got to the mall. I just barely made it into a service station. You know I don't like leaving you home alone for long when you're sick, so I asked the nice man if there was a pharmacy nearby. Well, there was — a real old-fashioned drug store with a soda fountain and everything — and the comic book store was only a block before it. I got your medicine *and* your present while my car was being fixed. See how Mommy's always thinking of you? Now you just open up for Mommy and — "

"I will if you lemme hold *Captain Hamster*," Jimmy replied. He looked angelic enough to be packing a shiv.

Motherhood works havoc on perception. Mrs. Hanson heard surrender in her baby's voice when what she should have heard was the sound of butter firming up rock-hard in his mouth. She offered him the comic with one hand and closed in with the filled spoon in the other.

In a breathtaking exhibition of speed and dexterity, Jimmy contrived to slap the new issue of *Captain Hamster* into the *Back off, Jack!* position across his mouth while at the same time flinging the old one aside so that it knocked over the open bottle on his nightstand. As the last dribble of medicine oozed its way into the shag carpet, Mrs. Hanson's last drop of patience went the way of the dodo. The neighbors who heard her scream only stopped short of calling 911 because they didn't want to be a bother.

Little Jimmy took the one remaining dose of his wasted medicine without further ado, in rightful fear for his life.

Mrs. Hanson went downstairs to the kitchen to call Jimmy's pediatrician, Dr. Beeman, and ask for a refill on the prescription. She had just hung

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up the phone when she felt something heavy fall on her shoulder. She turned to find herself staring into a pair of slightly buggy, definitely beady black eyes set in a hairy brown face. A teensy, triangular nose framed by bristling whiskers twitched furiously at her.

"What's this we hear about you yelling at your son?" the giant hamster demanded.

"Yah! Yah! Lemme at 'er! Lemme pound 'er! That'll learn 'er!" Something vaguely human was bouncing wildly up and down behind the hamster, its mop of untamed hair flying. It beat disproportionately large hands rhythmically on the kitchen walls, the counters, even the ceiling, like hell's (or possibly Bedlam's) answer to Gene Krupa.

"Easy, Bongo." The hamster held up one dainty pink paw. From a great distance away, figuratively speaking, Mrs. Hanson noted that the roly-poly beast was clad in a blue jumpsuit, complete with yellow cape. She'd never known there was that much Spandex in the universe.

"Aw c'mon, Cap, let Bongo do a number on her." A fresh voice butted in. For some reason it seemed to be coming from the oversized hummingbird zipping around the hamster's head. On second glance, Mrs. Hanson saw that it was no hummingbird but a winged girl in a spangled pink thong leotard. Despite her small size, she flaunted a pair of mammaries that simply had to be an aerodynamic disadvantage. "Do it! Do it!"

"Be silent, Laggi, Girl of the Starways," said a fourth voice. "It is not always Bongo's turn to deal with our foes. Sometimes they belong...to *me.*" Those warm, sinister, seductive tones put Mrs. Hanson in mind of dark places where unspeakable secrets murmured siren songs, luring the unsuspecting ever closer to a hideous doom. She realized it had been much too long since she'd last cleaned out the bathtub drain.

It just so happened that *drain* was an unfortunate thought to have right then, for the fourth voice belonged to a female whose unnerving smile revealed a formidable pair of fangs. She shunned the Spandex togs of her companions, favoring instead what resembled a full-body covering of black seaweed. Like Laggi (Girl of the Starways) she was a prime candidate for severe lower back pain after the age of thirty.

She took one of Mrs. Hanson's hands in both of her own and with a look only slightly less intense than a coiled cobra's said, "I am Lexa. I walk the night. And I hunger."

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Mrs. Hanson couldn't quite make up her mind whether or not to tell this person that it was only three o'clock and that she was walking the mid-afternoon. She decided against it. Some people didn't appreciate having their mistakes pointed out to them by total strangers.

Before Lexa could pursue the conversation, the caped hamster stepped between the two ladies. "First we allow her to explain her shameful treatment of our pal, Jimmy. *Then* we extract the full measure of justice." The tiny eyes, aglow with righteous indignation, fixed themselves on Mrs. Hanson. "*Well*?"

"Thank you very much for the opportunity," said Mrs. Hanson, and fainted.

Mrs. Hanson's belief in the curative powers of fainting spells was based entirely on her experience watching soap operas. In that happy realm, it was generally the case that if the heroine found herself facing the unfaceable, she'd faint, subsequently to come to her senses and be handed the happy information that It Had All Been Just a Horrid Dream. (Unless, of course, faltering ratings demanded that she come out of the faint only to pass into either full amnesia or a coma, depending on the state of contract negotiations at the time.)

Such was not the case for Mrs. Hanson. She revived to find that her uninvited callers were still there, that they had contrived to transport her unconscious form upstairs to her own bed, and that Captain Hamster had rooted through her drawers and soaked her best WonderBra in water to make a cold compress for her forehead.

She rose up squawking inarticulate protests, one black, lace-trimmed B-cup slipping down over her eye. Little Jimmy stood by her bedside, holding Lexa's pallid hand and snickering. "Gee, Mom, you look like a pirate," he declared, delighted.

"A sissy pirate," said Bongo, then added, "Arrrh."

Before Mrs. Hanson could respond, Captain Hamster spoke up: "Mrs. Hanson, we beg your pardon. Our pal Jimmy has explained that you were only trying to make him take his medicine. Although we do not approve of your methods, we are willing to overlook minor maternal thuggery in the interests of the boy's health. We feel quite comfortable leaving him in your capable hands once more."

"Leaving...?" Mrs. Hanson could not believe the sweet words she was

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hearing. She didn't know whence this gang of refugees from a nightmare had come, but she no longer questioned their reality *vis-à-vis* her sanity. Illusions did not tote full-grown women up an entire flight of stairs, as a rule. And since they *were* real, she didn't so much care where they'd come from as when they were going to get the hell gone.

"Of course, dear lady. The Frenzies never stay where they are not wanted. I promise you, we will be out of your house and your hair anon."

"And my underwear drawer," Mrs. Hanson specified.

Captain Hamster raised one paw and crossed his heart with the other. "Superhero's honor."

ONE WEEK LATER, Mrs. Hanson's opinion of superhero's honor was not a thing lawful to be uttered, but at least it was somewhat less incendiary than her opinion of some of the *other* lifeforms infesting her home. Unfortunately, she couldn't call the exterminator to get rid of them either: They came from the government and they were there to *help*. They said so. And they showed their IDs and badges and guns to any who dared disagree.

One of these lifeforms was Dr. Lorenzo Oglethorpe, Ph.D., who had neither badge nor gun, but whose unarmed tongue was a hideous implement of destruction nonetheless. It was a vast and terrible pity that he was off limits to exterminators everywhere, for in his own modest way he embodied their professional Grail: He looked exactly like the world's biggest cockroach.

"There's really a very simple explanation for what's happened to your son," said Dr. Oglethorpe.

"Sure there is," said Mr. Hanson, settling back in his favorite armchair. Although it was a weekday, he was at home, on leave with pay until further notice. His employer had proved to be quite understanding of the extraordinary situation chez Hanson, especially after a visit from the government. Now the lucky man took a pull at his beer and frowned to find the bottle empty. "Be a pal?" he said to the FBI agent at his elbow, brandishing the longneck in his face.

"I'll get that, dear." Mrs. Hanson sprang from her seat, closely followed by the agent assigned to her. She snatched the bottle from her

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husband's hand and hurried into the kitchen. Behind her, Dr. Oglethorpe was expanding upon Jimmy's condition, although he had yet to examine the subject in person. The government-appointed man of science had arrived at the Hanson household that very morning, just after Jimmy's departure for school, yet his lack of firsthand data did not bother Dr. Oglethorpe for an instant. As he himself had said when accepting the Nobel, "Formulate an elegant enough hypothesis and you can always persuade the facts to fall into line."

In Jimmy's case, Dr. Oglethorpe's hypothesis had something to do with Chaos Theory and cough syrup. Mrs. Hanson didn't need to hear it. She didn't want to hear it. Whenever a professional nerd like Dr. Oglethorpe promised you a "very simple explanation" it was never simple, except to another nerd. Wayne Hanson didn't have the scientific know-how to program the VCR, but at least he could fake interest and comprehension while the good doctor droned on.

"Better him than me," she muttered, flipping the lids off a pair of longnecks.

"You say something, ma'am?" asked Mrs. Hanson's personal G-man.

"I was just wondering if you'd like one too," she replied brightly.

"Thank you, ma'am; not on duty."

"Okay." She shrugged and sucked down half a bottle, then belched and giggled.

"Ma'am, are you all right?" The agent seemed to be sincerely concerned.

"No." Mrs. Hanson absorbed the remainder of the beer with a second gargantuan swallow. "Now I am."

There was a sharp humming in her ears. "Did anyone ever tell you that chug-a-lug contests were what brought down the exquisite galaxy-spanning civilization of the Fnorn?" It was Laggi, Girl of the Starways, and not the abrupt attack of some beer-fueled illusion. The minuscule heroine hovered in front of Mrs. Hanson's eyes, a blur of wings. "Captain Hamster wants me to tell you that there's to be no more alcohol in this house. It sets a bad example for little Jimmy."

"Little Jimmy is in school right now, along with a bodyguard of seven — count 'em, seven — FBI agents, and you can tell Captain Hamster from me that if he'd spend less time running my life and more time eating those

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pesky Jehovah's Witnesses, he might do some actual good around here," Mrs. Hanson snarled.

"Hmph!" Laggi's weensy lips curled with scorn. "In the first place, Captain Hamster does not eat Jehovah's Witnesses or any other religious proselytes; he only stuffs them in his mighty cheek pouches of steel until they've learned the error of their importunate ways. Besides, he doesn't stuff *all* of them; just the ones who can't take a hint. Second, he says that last batch wasn't Jehovah's Witnesses, they were videojournalists from *HardCopy*. Third, he wants to know why your house is under constant siege by these people, and fourth — " She zipped over to perch provocatively on the FBI agent's shoulder and croon in his ear, " —has anyone ever told you you look like David Duchovny?"

Mrs. Hanson snatched up the little alien and squeezed her with enough force to crush a full beer can. The assault had no ill effect, for — as Jimmy could have told his mother in a moment — Laggi's body was strong enough to withstand the whole gamut of cosmic forces from Asteroids to Zeta Rays. (Lucky for Laggi that Mrs. Hanson didn't know her only weakness was a severe allergy to dairy products, or the put-upon housewife would've dunked the Girl of the Starways in moo juice like an alien Oreo.)

"Now you listen to me, you twerp!" she bellowed. "You go back and tell Super Rodent that he's the reason we're combing *paparazzi* out of the privet hedges; him and the rest of you. When you idiots showed up, you could've just left this house and us in peace, but no: *You* had to hang around until the neighbors noticed. *You* had to stay put until the cops came, *and* the press, *and* the government!"

"I don't see how it's any of our doing," Laggi replied in the same tone of voice Mrs. Hanson generally used on Jimmy, five parts condescension to one part long-suffering patience. "Our purpose is to right wrongs and fight crime. How could we do either until we found out where the wrongs and the crimes were happening? So we had to wait for the six o'clock news, except by that time we *were* the six o'clock news. You know, *some* people aren't too cheap to spring for cable so they can get CNN."

"You don't get cable?" The FBI man was appalled.

Just then, there was a loud riff on the door leading from the kitchen to the back yard, then a FLAM! that blew it off its hinges, aided and abetted

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by the battered body of another federal agent. Bongo stepped into the room, grinning ear to ear.

He was promptly followed by Captain Hamster, who scurried through the ravaged portal and stared down at the bruised and bleeding man. He turned to Bongo and peevishly demanded, "Once, just once, couldn't you simply *knock*?"

"What can I say?" Bongo shrugged. "I got rhythm." His devil-may-care attitude evaporated when he saw what Mrs. Hanson had clutched in her hand. "Hey! Wottcha doin' to Laggi, Girl of the Starways?"

Before Mrs. Hanson could reply, a slender white hand materialized out of thin air, its blood red nails tracing the length of her ribcage, tickling without mercy. Helpless laughter shook her; she released the alien adventuress just as her assailant, Lexa, became fully visible.

"Dear God, how did you do that?" the G-man blurted.

"How?" Lexa echoed in tones favored by better sepulchres everywhere. "Does it truly matter, the *how*? In the vast, shadowed realm that is eternity, so little truly matters. I know this, for I am Lexa. I walk the night. And I hunger." She lowered smoky eyelids and drew nearer, adding as she closed in on him, "Also, do you know you look like David Duchovny?"

He blushed becomingly. "Well, I have been told that I — "

"Shall we find out if you taste like him too?"

"I saw him first, you breathing-impaired bimbo!"

Mr. Hanson, Dr. Oglethorpe, and the spare FBI agents walked in just in time to help break up the cat fight between the winged alien and the vampire.

Mr. Hanson quickly decided to leave the peace-keeping violence to the professionals. Taking his wife by the arm, he drew her off into a DMZ corner of the kitchen. "Honey?" he said in his patented just-the-two-of-us-movie-hotcha wheedle. "Darling? Uh...Do you think you could maybe remember where that drugstore was where you got Jimmy's prescription filled?"

"I already told you, I *don't* remember," Mrs. Hanson snarled. "I only went there because I happened to get stuck in the neighborhood. I never intended to go back, so I didn't pay attention to where it was, just like I told you *and* the journalists, *and* the FBI *and* that chinless geek Oglethorpe.

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And I'm getting damned sick and tired of being badgered about this. Dr. Beeman can give you all the copies of Jimmy's prescription you want, so why bug *me*?"

"Because it is not the prescription *per se* which is important," said the aforementioned chinless geek. Dr. Oglethorpe too had opted to retire from the field of battle. He was presently cleansing the left lens of his eyeglasses with a pristine white pocket handkerchief. (Laggi, Girl of the Starways, was a fierce fighter, but not the world's most accurate shot with spit.) "You see, Mrs. Hanson, the original medicine which your son took is a simple compound meant to relieve heavy otolaryngological congestion."

"Well of course it is," said Mrs. Hanson blandly while inside she was screaming *He's going to make me listen to his simple explanation! Damn gun control anyway!* She cast about for the nearest escape hatch, but all exits from the kitchen were blocked by the squabbling forces of Law and Order versus Truth and Justice.

"Ordinarily, it would have done nothing more to your boy than relieve symptoms of stuffy ear, nose, and throat," the doctor went on. "It is a readily available, frequently prescribed, and constantly stocked pediatric medicament. However, it is my theory that at the drug store where you purchased one particular bottle of this elixir, the pharmacist was, er, less than punctilious in the execution of his professional duties and — "

"He stored the stuff wrong and it went funny on him," Mr. Hanson put in.

Dr. Oglethorpe sniffed. "Hmph! I see nothing humorous about a molecular-level change brought on by undetermined environmental factors. Nor the effect it has had on your son."

"Oh no?" Mr. Hanson folded his arms. "Anything that kid wants to *be* real *gets* real! He wants to see a giant rat in tights, *whammo!*, he gets a giant rat in tights. And as soon as the little woman remembers where she bought the stuff, I'm going over there, buy a bottle, suck it down, and start doing a little wanting of my own. You don't think *that's* funny, just wait'll you hear me laughing on board my own private yacht!"

"Uh, Mr. Hanson, sir?" It was the agent whose resemblance to David Duchovny had set off the Lexa/Laggi donnybrook. Having successfully reduced that brawl to an exchange of nasty personal remarks (with Bongo

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as the gleeful referee), he was at liberty to turn his professional attention elsewhere. "Sir, it's not that simple."

"I should say not!" Dr. Oglethorpe agreed. "The medicine in question is not sold over-the-counter. You would need a prescription to — "

"Besides," the agent put in, "if your wife does happen to recall the location of the drugstore where she purchased the cough syrup in question, we'll have to confiscate all remaining supplies for reasons of national security."

Mr. Hanson took umbrage and launched into a spirited rant against Big Government. It was one of his standard rants, an old favorite that his wife had heard many times before. While Wayne inveighed against jackbooted thugs (though he couldn't tell jackboots from jack squat) she ignored him with a clear conscience and gave herself up to one surprising thought:

I actually understood *Dr. Oglethorpe's explanation! Wow. And after all those years of Mom telling me that* real *girls can't handle* science.

Yes, it had all come together for her in one vast Unified Geek Theory. However, there were still a few details bothering her. Seeing as how the squabble between Laggi and Lexa had run out of steam, she sidled over to the presently unoccupied cosmic quartet of wrong-righters to doublecheck her conclusions.

"Let me see if I've got this straight: Jimmy always wanted you to be real, so as soon as he took that screwed-up cough syrup you became real?"

"*Quod erat demostrandum*," said Captain Hamster.

"Uh-huh," said Mrs. Hanson, as if a Latin-spouting rodent were an everyday occurrence. "Well, that accounts for it."

"For what?"

"For why we've been attracting sects and violence like free gin attracts Republicans. Why our front steps are hip-deep in pamphlets from Buddhists, Bahais, Baptists, Brahmans — "

Captain Hamster raised a staying paw. "I get the picture. I do read the newspapers before I shred them for bedding, you know. I get out of my giant nuclear-powered exercise wheel *sometimes*."

It was no use: Mrs. Hanson was on a roll, and she didn't even need a giant nuclear-powered exercise wheel to keep going. " — Muslims, Methodists, Manichaeans — " She paused, took a deep breath, and

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concluded: " — Jews, Jains and heaven-help-us gymnosophists! They're all after Jimmy because if Jimmy wants something, it's so. Including what he wants about God, the universe, and — and — " She spread her hands. " — and the cough syrup did it?"

The hamster nodded. "More or less."

"And if I can remember where I bought the cough syrup, maybe the pharmacist has some more, and then the government can go confiscate it, analyze it, duplicate it, and use it only in the best interests of national security?"

"Um..." Captain Hamster never could tell a lie. "It will make the government very happy if you can remember where you bought it, yes."

"And once the government's got it, maybe we can sic these religious noodniks on them, for a change?"

"Well, I *suppose*..." The hamster shrugged very expressively for a creature with no shoulders worth the name.

"Oh, well if *that's* all — !" Mrs. Hanson had one of those bell-like laughs singular in its power to annoy. "I charged my car repair on Visa and I gave my husband the receipt. It's got the garage address on it. Find the garage and you'll find the drug store, find the drug store and you'll find the — "

" — boy's been kidnapped!" shouted the bloody and bedraggled FBI agent who lurched into the kitchen and collapsed into Captain Hamster's outstretched paws.

LESS THAN ONE hour later, the kitchen was virtually deserted. The wounded agent had barely gasped out half his tale before Captain Hamster and the Frenzies as one shouted their copyrighted battlecry, "Duck and cover, here comes Justice!" and charged off. The other G-men did their comrade the courtesy of letting him tell the full story: How a suicidal band of men (and possibly women) in ninja-knockoff black p.j.s and face masks had stormed the P.S. 187 lunchroom; how Jimmy's bodyguards had been unable to use their firearms, for fear of hitting the children; how in the fierce hand-to-hand combat that followed, the masked invaders had defied both the agents' kung-fu and the lunch-ladies' auxiliary attacks with iron ladles, Formica trays, and Swedish meatballs.

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A gallant defense, to no avail: The invaders glommed Jimmy and were gone. Luckily — if the word could be applied to such a parlous situation — as they were making their escape, one of their number slipped on a Swedish meatball, fell, and was captured. Under questioning he revealed all, including where his confederates were taking the boy. He even gave the FBI agents a business card with the address of the zealots' hideout on it.

"How did you get so much out of him so fast?" asked the agent who really did look a lot like David Duchovny. "I mean, the *regulations* say we're not allowed to torture suspects, but — "

"I used my fake IRS badge," the battered agent replied. "He sang like Streisand." He then passed around the tattle-tale business card.

That was all the remaining G-men needed. They lit out without a backward glance, leaving Dr. Oglethorpe to accompany their injured comrade to the hospital and the Hansons to stand in the midst of their half-wrecked kitchen looking like idiots.

Mrs. Hanson broke down into wild sobs and clung to her husband while he did his poor best to comfort her. "Look, honey, it's not like they don't know *where* Jimmy is. The worst is over. Now the only thing we've got to do is wait here and — "

"The worst is *over*?" Mrs. Hanson was no superbeing, but she had powers of ridicule and sarcasm far beyond those of mortal men. "And I suppose an armed hostage situation with *our* son in the middle of it is just a little walk in the park?"

"Depends on the park," Mr. Hanson replied, trying to lighten the mood. "Ow," he added when his bride wordlessly expressed her desire that he stop playing the fool. She would have added a dollop of harsh words to accompany her patented instep-stomp, but tears overcame her once more.

Her husband held her close, whispered soft words that were the usual nonsense most people intone when trying to soothe the distraught. His assurances had as much footing in reality as a politician's promises, and were similarly based on what he thought his audience wanted to hear.

Mrs. Hanson had spent enough years in the company of Mr. Hanson to recognize yet another load of his patented bushwah when she heard it. He meant well this time, but he had snowed her once too often in the past for far less noble reasons, one of them named Donna and the other Tawni.

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In ordinary circumstances she would have snapped, "Oh, clam it, Wayne. If someone blew up the whole damn world you'd still try telling me that everything was going to be all right. I believe you about as far as I can shot-put Newt Gingrich. Grow up, would you?" Then she would have resumed bawling even louder, just to show him who was boss.

These were not ordinary circumstances.

To her own silent astonishment and completely against her will, Mrs. Hanson found herself becoming less hysterical. The longer her husband rattled on about how the SWAT teams would never do anything to endanger Jimmy and how the FBI had the situation under complete control, the more she became convinced that he was right. The sensation was at once comforting and terrifying. One tiny spark of self-determination flared up in the back of her mind, demanding *What the frap is going on here! What's happening to me!*

She caught herself saying, "Yes, darling, of course you're right." Her vision flickered. She realized she was actually *batting her eyelashes* at the goofball she'd married, and that words were escaping her lips bathed in the richest tones of unconditional faith and adoration. The last ort of her former contempt for Mr. Hanson stuck around until it heard her say, "I'm not afraid of anything bad happening so long as *you're* here to protect us." Then it went belly-up beyond hope of resurrection.

"How right you are, my angel," said Mr. Hanson. (Was it a trick of the light, or was his jaw squarer than before? And where had that manly cleft in his chin sprung from?) "There's no need to fear so long as I am here to make everything all right. And I will. But why do we waste our time, waiting for others, less worthy, to do what only I have the power to accomplish?" He thumped his chest.

"But you were the one who said we should wait here, my beloved," she replied, running her fingers through his flowing locks. The erosions of time had been miraculously reversed — better than reversed, for Mr. Hanson had suddenly sprouted a mane of hair that could only be described as lush and — could it be? — heroic.

"Would I suggest so craven a course of action? Forbid it, almighty God! Our little boy *needs* us. Our place is with Jimmy!" he declaimed, and he swept Mrs. Hanson up in arms gone inexplicably muscular and bore her out to the car.

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It was a cow-crap brown Toyota when he popped her into it. By the time he drove through the fifth red light, it had transformed into a sleek, midnight-black vehicle one-third Porsche, one-third Batmobile, and one-third robo-panther. He drove at speeds only seen in Spielberg movies, had no accidents, got no tickets, and wore no safety belt. As for Mrs. Hanson, the only sounds she seemed capable of making were alternately "Eek!" and "Oooh!"

Mr. Hanson finally brought his new vehicle to a shrieking, brake-burning halt in front of a comic book store in a strange section of town. As she climbed shakily out of the car, Mrs. Hanson looked up and down the street, a sense of *déjà vu* heavy upon her. She stared into the comic book shop window; a giant cardboard cutout of Captain Hamster stared back at her, his mighty cheek-pouches of steel crammed with bad guys.

She wanted to exclaim "Holy shit," but for some reason it came out of her mouth as "Oh my goodness me!" One block away, the street was a moil of prowl cars, fire trucks, ambulances, and assorted police transports. Yellow crime-scene tape and sawhorse barricades cluttered up the few feet of space not already occupied by vehicles. All sorts of men with all sorts of guns were swarming everywhere. A dozen bullhorns contended for supremacy.

"Loud, isn't it?" said Captain Hamster.

"Eek!" exclaimed Mrs. Hanson, jumping into her husband's arms. In the past thirty minutes she'd spent more time in his embrace than in the past thirty months.

The caped critter waddled up to the comic shop window and studied his cardboard alter-ego. "They didn't get my good side," he opined. "Are my eyes *really* that beady?" He made a sound of disgust, then turned to the Hansons. "The hour has struck," he intoned.

Mrs. Hanson said, "Huh?" and checked her wristwatch.

"Not *that* hour," Captain Hamster told her. He stared Mr. Hanson full in the face, and for a heartbeat the two of them appeared to be the poster children for Significant Pauses everywhere. "*Your* hour," he said.

Mr. Hanson slapped the giant rodent on the back, threw back his head, and gave one of those exultant laughs sacred only to heroes with prior script-approval and a percentage of the gross. "Oh, this won't take an

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hour," he said, and strode straight for the nearest prowl car, his wife and the mighty marmotoid trailing in his valiant wake.

He was met by a pair of uniformed officers who attempted to persuade him to turn back, go home, move along and break it up. He chose the lattermost option.

He's not really *picking up that car and holding it over his head,* Mrs. Hanson told herself as she stared at her husband's new way of dealing with less-than-helpful policemen. *It just* looks *that way.* The prowl car went sailing through the air and landed one intersection down with a *crump.* It resembled nothing so much as one of the abandoned Concertinas of the Gods. This done, he continued his onward march, heading right for the storefront site where the police and FBI had the kidnappers holed up.

His approach was greeted by a hail of gunfire. He behaved as if the bullets were no more than bumblebees. In fact, he behaved better than that: In the past, Mr. Hanson had been known to run into the house, screaming like a schoolgirl, whenever his stint at the barbecue grill was interrupted by the appearance of anything with a stinger or a nasty bite, from chiggers to chipmunks.

Mrs. Hanson pressed her fists to her mouth and strangled a shriek as she watched her now-beloved husband wade through the firefight. She heard herself gasp out the words, "Bullets won't stop him!" and then something heavy struck her from behind, whomping the breath from her body and sending her sprawling headfirst into the side of one of the other police cars. Pretty stars twinkled before her eyes in a charming selection of decorator shades, but she stubbornly refused to slip into unconsciousness. Something deep within her protested that it was bad enough she was spouting clichés, she was damned if she was going to live them too. She hauled herself hand over hand back into the realm of full awareness and rested over the hood of the prowl car.

"Sorry 'bout that," came a sheepish voice behind her.

She turned her head slightly to see Bongo toeing the ground, his face hot with blushes.

"I told you and *told* you," Captain Hamster chided his redoubtable sidekick. "Some of us were never meant to give others an encouraging pat on the back."

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"Well, I *said* I was sorry," Bongo snapped, and slapped his hand down on the car's roof for emphasis. The vehicle doubled up into a scrapmetal V, and its complement of officers broke into prayers of thanksgiving that they had not been inside their ruined car at the time.

Mrs. Hanson shoved herself off the windshield and stood up. (She'd slid down the hood the instant Bongo smacked the car.) She rounded on Bongo and demanded, "What are you waiting for? Why are you just standing there while my poor husband's facing a nest of ninjas single-handed? You're a super-hero; go help him!"

Captain Hamster intervened. "I'm afraid he can't do that now, Mrs. Hanson," he said. "None of us can."

"Why the heeee — Why not?" Just in time Mrs. Hanson reminded herself of the Frenzies' dislike for gutter language. She'd taken enough upside-the-head lessons for one day.

"Because little Jimmy believes that his daddy doesn't need any help to save him."

"I don't care what the kid wants, he's got his nerve making Wayne go in there and — "

"I didn't say that this is how Jimmy *wants* it, Mrs. Hanson," Captain Hamster said softly. "I said this is how he *believes* it should be."

"Not what he wants but what he...?" Mrs. Hanson spoke as one awakening from a deep and discombobulating dream. Two and two suddenly clicked together on the abacus of her brain, even though the same Mom who'd taught her that girls can't handle science had said similar things about math. In that moment, Mrs. Hanson achieved a conclusion, a decision, and a plan of action all at the same time.

Bullets were still flying, but not so many as before. She shaded her eyes and tried to see what had become of Wayne. He was gone from sight, but the door to the kidnapper's lair was now no more than a tangle of twisted metal and shattered glass.

She knew that door. In happier days it had sported several lines of gold-trimmed letters informing the general public that Dolan's Drugstore was open from nine to six weekdays, nine to three Saturdays, with extended evening hours Thursday and Closed all day Sunday.

The last gunshot sounded on the air and was stilled. The FBI agents exchanged speculative looks with the police until someone in authority

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(or with a lot of nerve) announced, "Let's move in, boys!" They plowed forward *en masse*, ready for anything.

Anything but Wayne Hanson, glorious in red-white-and-blue Spandex, his shoulders wider than the mangled doorway. He had little Jimmy perched on one shoulder and in either hand he dragged an unconscious ninja wannabe by the scruff. He sidestepped into the street, then tossed his captives, one by one, through the gaping doors of the waiting paddywagon. The policemen stared, nonplussed.

"Where the hell did *that* thing come from?" asked one.

"Looks like something out of an old gangster movie," said another. "Not like anything we've got in the motor pool."

Mrs. Hanson thought she could tell the nice men just where their newest vehicle had sprung from, but she had other fish to fry, and she was going to do them up brown in magic cough syrup. She dashed through the doorway while SuperWayne fielded the plaudits of the crowd, his rescued son grinning like a beaver at a peg-legged pirates' convention.

Inside the drugstore, all was still and a little sticky. Battered ninjas slumped in puddles of strawberry sauce and slowly cooling hot fudge. Mr. Dolan himself was still tied up and stowed under the soda fountain counter, just below the taps that spouted Coke and Seven-Up and Dr. Pepper, a piece of duct tape over his mouth. Mrs. Hanson tore it off without preamble or ceremony, indifferent to the pharmacist's shriek of pain.

"Where do you keep the cough syrup?" she demanded, waggling the tape in his face. It now sported more than half of the gentleman's former mustache and looked like the world's biggest caterpillar.

"What? Why do you want — ?" Mr. Dolan winced. His upper lip was an angry red and it obviously hurt to talk. "Look, lady, if you'll just untie me — "

Mrs. Hanson ignored his request. Calmly she glanced about the ruined drugstore until her eyes lit on one of those ornamental glass vessels filled with colored water. She dumped out the water, smashed the glass, selected a good-sized shard, and held it to the still bound pharmacist's throat. "It's a prescription cough syrup for kids, you just dispensed me a bottle of it a couple of days ago, I want some more, I want it now, and I bet you five bucks that if I slit your throat they'll blame it on the ninjas."

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Mr. Dolan pursed his lips. "They're not ninjas," he said sullenly. "They're members of the First Church of the Divine Harmony. If you kill me, you won't be able to blame it on them: They don't believe in violence."

Mrs. Hanson surveyed the wreckage. "Pardon me if I die laughing," she said. "They kidnap my son, they beat the crap out of a bunch of FBI agents, they hole up here, they bind and gag you, they hold off all comers in a hail of gunfire, and *you* tell me they don't believe in violence?"

"Except in the best interests of protecting the Church and saving unbelievers from burning in hell for all eternity," the druggist clarified.

"Oh, well that sounds..." *Reasonable* didn't strike her as quite the word she was after. "...familiar."

The druggist sighed. "You want to talk sons, try talking to mine. He joined them, which is how they happened to pick my store for their hide-out. Even swiped a bunch of my business cards! I tell you, kids today — "

Mrs. Hanson didn't have time for this. Any minute now the FBI and the cops would come pouring in. "Okay, so they *won't* blame the ninjas for it if I slit your throat, but you'll still be dead, and all because you wouldn't give me one lousy bottle of cough syrup. Does that *really* seem like something worth dying for?"

"Hell no," said Mr. Dolan, and to quote the worse-for-ninja-wear FBI agent, he sang like Streisand (the Early Years).

Following his directions, Mrs. Hanson looked up Jimmy's old prescription in his files, told him what she found there, and with his continuing help located the large dispenser bottle on the shelves. Her eyes shone as she took it down and unscrewed the cap.

The cap would not unscrew. The cap was covered with a welter of taunting heiroglyphics instructing the would-be opener to turn cap while pressing down, pushing in at the arrows, doing the hokey-pokey, and sacrificing a red yearling bull-calf without blemish to Aesculaepius.

"It's child-safe!" Mrs. Hanson howled. "This miserable cap is child-safe and it's not even on a consumer-sized take-home bottle! Dear God, *why*?"

"New regulations," said Mr. Dolan. "I could help you get it open if you untied me."

Mrs. Hanson's fingers flew over the knots binding the druggist's

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wrists and ankles. *Sotto voce* she cursed all Boy Scout leaders everywhere. Didn't they realize that statistics showed that thirty-one percent of all Tenderfeet grew up to be religious loonies-cum-ninjas?

Once free of his bonds, the pharmacist sat there rubbing the circulation back into his wrists. Mrs. Hanson squatted before him, bouncing on her haunches in an agony of impatience. "Come on, come on, put wheels on it, get that bottle *open*," she whined.

"What's the rush?"

"Don't ask questions, just do it." The glass shard flashed in his face, trimming the hairs in his left nostril.

As she watched the druggist deal with the recalcitrant bottle, Mrs. Hanson's thoughts bubbled in joyful anticipation. *Soon, oh soon! Money, mansions, movie star lovers, my own line of designer clothes at prices most women can afford, a signature fragrance, everything that I always believed should be mine —*

"Hurry *up*," she snarled, making another feint at Mr. Dolan's face with her pickup dagger.

Just then she heard a gasp from somewhere behind her. "Mom! What're you doing?" came little Jimmy's plaintive cry.

The hand that held the nasty, long, sharp pointy piece of glass went numb at the sound. The shard dropped and shattered. Mrs. Hanson turned to see her only child standing in the doorway, backed by Dr. Oglethorpe and a brace of FBI agents. From outside came the hubbub of SuperWayne fielding a host of questions from the media.

Under Jimmy's horrified stare, Mrs. Hanson sensed a bizarre conversion overtaking her. It was as if somewhere deep inside her a hungry vortex had opened up and was now sucking away all vestiges of ruthless ambition. Every Danielle Steel novel she had ever read, replete with the interlaced sagas of long-legged, orgasm-enriched, strong-minded and iron-thighed career women, dwindled to so much mental dross. They were replaced by the unmistakable urge to bake chocolate chip cookies and a celestial vision of Martha Stewart's face illuminated beneath the legend *In hoc bimbo vinces*. The cavern of her skull, where once she had hosted the unslaked desire to be one of the Rich and Famous, now echoed with the alien thought: *That's not how* my *Mom's supposed to be!*

It was a frightful experience, that invasion. For the first time in her life

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she was living up to someone else's expectations, willy-nilly. *What about self-determination*? her ego wailed. *What about celebrating the abiding power of* me-*ness*?

As if you ever were *self-determined,* came the sneered response from the one reactionary morsel of her much-beleaguered spirit. *You got married because every second article in the women's magazines is about how to nab a man and every third one's about how to hold him once you've got him. You had Jimmy right off the bat because your parents kept sending you newspaper clippings about the rising rate of infertility and the dangers of late-life pregnancies. You've let everyone else tell you what you're supposed to want so far, including Danielle Steel. Why not let your son in on the act too? Trust me, it's easier than thinking for yourself.* And with a sigh of relief it tied on an apron and started hanging dimity curtains all over Mrs. Hanson's soul.

She started toward her son on wobbly legs, hands outstretched. "Oh, baby — " she began.

Before anyone else could move, Dr. Oglethorpe crossed the wreckage and was there to support Mrs. Hanson, lest she fall. "There, there, dear lady, you've been under some strain, but soon everything will be — "

"Who's that guy?" Jimmy wanted to know.

"It's all right, darling," Mrs. Hanson said, smiling weakly. "This is Dr. Oglethorpe; you never met him. He's a scientist who — "

"A *scientist*?" Jimmy's voice scaled upwards, aghast.

"Well, yes dear," his mother said, puzzled by her boy's horrified reaction. "What's wrong with — ?"

"Hey, lady!" Mr. Dolan called from behind. "You still want this?" He wigwagged the big bottle.

The air crackled. A hollow, hideous evil laugh rang out. "I'll take that!" In the blink of several eyes, Dr. Oglethorpe sprang upon Mr. Dolan like the world's biggest spider and snatched the bottle from the pharmacist's grasp. Madness had transformed his bland, geeky features into a writhing mask of power-hungry ruthlessness seldom seen outside a Jonny Quest cartoon. "Today the cough syrup, tomorrow the world!" He threw back his head and cackled, then drew a bulbous purple raygun from the pocket of his chinos.

One of the FBI agents flanking Jimmy tried to shoot the hideously

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mutated scientist, but a single blast of Dr. Oglethorpe's ray turned him into a skink. The second agent was a slow learner, for which fault he too was soon scuttling all over the floor on four scaly legs. Grinning like a shark with lockjaw, Dr. Oglethorpe rounded the gun on Mr. Dolan. The pharmacist raised his hands in the most peaceable of surrenders. Dr. Oglethorpe zapped him just for the hell of it, then filled the drugstore with maniacal tittering.

"Jimmy, get Daddy!" Mrs. Hanson shouted, but to no avail. Jimmy gaped at the three hapless raygun-spawned lizards and flew into an unreasoning panic. He uttered a wail of despair and, in the best of Stupid Sci-Fi Movie traditions, bolted in the wrong direction: Not out the door and off to summon his suddenly super-endowed father, but over the skinks and straight into the arms of his mom. Even as he did so, Dr. Oglethorpe was upon them, the raygun's snout pressed to Mrs. Hanson's temple.

"Don't try anythink...*foolish*, my dear," he hissed in her ear. He had acquired a Mittel-European accent, heavily laced with the overtones of the Orient, from the same place he'd gotten that raygun. "It vould be a shame if the boy vere to zee you become a zalamander, ah so?"

Mrs. Hanson moistened her lips. They had gone quite dry, despite a liberal coating of Glossy Melon Surprise. Having a raygun poking you in the side of the head did things like that, the promises of the U.S. cosmetics industry be damned. "Jimmy dear, Mommy thinks this would be a very good time to wish the naughty scientist faaaar, faaaar away," she said quietly.

"He can't wish him away," said the familiar voice of Captain Hamster. The fluffy avenger stood just within the doorway of Dolan's Drugstore, backed by the Frenzies and SuperWayne. Never had Mrs. Hanson seen so grave a look in the colossal creature's eyes. "No more than he can *want* or *will* or *wink* him away. I told you before: Jimmy has the power to change reality not according to what he wants, but according to what he *believes*."

"That's what I thought." Mrs. Hanson nodded as much as Dr. Oglethorpe's raygun would allow. "You know, you might've been more specific about it earlier. You're the one who said that if Jimmy wanted something — "

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"No, madam, *you* used the word 'want,' not I; you and the rest of the humans."

"*This* is a fine time to chop logic," the imperiled lady said. "You'd make a great lawyer."

Captain Hamster looked hurt. "I'm only a superhero," he said. "I'm usually too busy advancing the plot to explain it."

"I, on zee ozzer handt, am a zientist," Dr. Oglethorpe purred in her ear. "Und I humbly beg to assure *Memsahib* Hanson zat zere iss a verry zimple eggsblanation for — "

"Stow it, Frankenstein!" Bongo shouted, bouncing on the balls of his feet and drumming out his frustration on the soda fountain. The marble countertop snapped and crumbled like a piece of Melba toast.

"Let her go, you fiend!" SuperWayne bellowed from the doorway. He flexed his biceps and the concussion alone was enough to dislodge a fresh shower of plaster from the battered ceiling.

"So sorry, please not to come any closer." Dr. Oglethorpe's trigger-finger twitched. Mrs. Hanson heard a distinct click even though she was pretty damn sure that no raygun worth its salt would make a sound like a Colt .45 being cocked.

But that's how Jimmy thinks *it should be!* she realized. *That's how he* believes *it is, the same way he believes that his daddy can rescue him from anything and that I'm the perfect housewife and that giant superhero hamsters really exist and that all scientists are mad scientists and — and — and — !*

Her heart sank. She knew how great the difference was between wanting and believing. It was a gulf of meaning that had swallowed many faiths, marriages, and Federal budgets. No matter how much Jimmy might *want* to see his Mom rescued from this ugly situation (skinkifying raygun to temple), he didn't *believe* it could be done in the existing circumstances (skinkifying raygun to temple). Even though he was only eight years old, he no longer believed in Santa, the Easter bunny, or a *deus ex machina.*

All of a sudden she remembered one more thing that Jimmy *did* believe.

"Dr. Oglethorpe, why don't you put that nasty ol' raygun down?" she wheedled.

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"Vhy?" he echoed. "Ze mad zientist alvays needs zer beautiful hostage to guarantee his ezgape!"

"But it's *soooo* unnecessary. You've got what you came for. Gulp down a big swallow of that cough syrup and none of them will be able to stop you from walking out of here and taking over the world before dinnertime. That *is* what you have in mind, isn't it?"

The doctor stared at her as though she'd turned into a skink of her own free will. "You know, zat's right." He released his hold and scratched his balding pate in thought. "It neffer occurred to me. You know vat zey say: Ven you are a megalomaniac, ze mind iss ze first zing to go, heh, heh. Vell — " He raised the open bottle to his lips " — here's vorld domination in your eye."

"Oh, wait a minute, doctor darling." Mrs. Hanson laid one soft, white hand on the madman's arm. "That stuff *does* taste icky — just you ask Jimmy if you don't believe me. Let me get you something to wash away the aftertaste, okay?" She used her dimples on him in ways forbidden by the Geneva Conventions. Jimmy rolled his eyes at his mother's kittenish excesses and made loud, pointed gagging sounds, but since he held fast to every eight-year-old boy's belief that all girls are mushy, his powers didn't impede Mrs. Hanson's use of full-bore feminine wiles.

Dr. Oglethorpe regarded her suspiciously. "Ah so, vhy are you beink zo nice to me?"

"You're about to rule the world. Can you blame a girl for wanting to get on your good side? Besides, how could I hurt you?" She brought the eyelashes into play.

"For zat zere iss a very zimple eggsblanation: You could zlip somesink naughty into zat drink."

Mrs. Hanson actually said the words, "Pish-tush, silly man. You're going to be drinking the cough syrup first: Whatever you believe will be real. Do you *believe* that a woman like me could outwit a man like you?"

"*Ha*!" Dr. Oglethorpe's contemptuous response was pure reflex.

"Besides — " Mrs. Hanson suggestively traced the curves of the madman's raygun with one finger " — *don't* you believe that a woman like me could fall for a big, strong, mad scientist like you?"

"You could?" His eyebrows rose to new heights.

In answer, Mrs. Hanson leaned nearer and breathed in his ear, "A very

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simple explanation of Fermat's last theorem gets me soooooooo *hot*."

"Ah...ah...ah..." Dr. Oglethorpe's forehead was shiny with sweat which he ineffectually tried to wipe off with the cough syrup bottle. "I zink I *vill* haf zat drink, my little cherry blossom."

"Your wish is my command," Mrs. Hanson murmured, and tripped gaily over to the half-ruined soda fountain to draw him a dark and foaming draught. None of the assembled superheroes made a move to interfere, for the evil Dr. Oglethorpe made sure to keep his raygun trained on little Jimmy the whole time as surety for their good behavior.

"Undt now," he said when she returned to his side, "again a toast: To me!" He guzzled the contents of the cough syrup bottle, then dropped the empty to the floor and made a face.

"I told you it tasted icky, pumpkin," said Mrs. Hanson, passing him the chaser.

He looked good for guzzling that too, but partway through he paused, lowered the glass, and stared into it. "*Zis* iss not zer pause zat refreshes!" he accused.

"No, it's Dr. Pepper," Mrs. Hanson told him.

"*Dr. Pepper*?" Jimmy echoed. "Ewwwwww! Prune soda!"

Calmly and casually, Mrs. Hanson said, "Sweetie, Mommy's told you over and over, Dr. Pepper is very nice and very tasty and Daddy likes it and it is *not* made from — "

"It is *too* made from prunes!" Jimmy insisted.

"Do not contradict your *mama-san*, unworthy offspring," Dr. Oglethorpe snarled. "If she says it is not made from prunes, zen you vill agree or..." He aimed his raygun at the child meaningly.

"But it *is so too!* It *is*!" the boy cried with all the fervor of an early Christian opting for the lions. "It *tastes* like it is, so it *is*, and if you eat prunes *or* drink 'em then everyone knows what hap — "

"Eat hot skink, miserable worm!" the mad doctor shrieked, and squeezed the trigger.

A large, green, webbed hand knocked the raygun to the floor, deflecting its beam neatly. "Don't move, earthling," said the warty, pop-eyed alien who had suddenly appeared. Yellow squiggles of pure mental energy shot from his eyes to Dr. Oglethorpe's, buzzing like a hive full of asthmatic bees.

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Immediately the deranged scientist froze in place, his eyes glazing over. "Yes, Master," he intoned. As Jimmy could have told him in an instant, if he'd been in any state to listen, not even the awesome powers conferred by the mutated cough syrup could stand against the psychic might of the Toad-Men of Skraax.

Two more Toad-Men materialized in a haze of twinkly lights to slap the helpless human into Salvador Dali's idea of a straight-jacket. "Good work, Commander!" said one. "Close study of this specimen will do much to aid, abet, and hasten our inevitable conquest of this puny planet, mwahahaha*croak.*" The lights twinkled all around them again and they vanished, taking Dr. Oglethorpe with them.

Bongo leaped forward. "Pulsing percussion, Captain Hamster, we can't just let them beat it like that! He may have been a power-hungry maniac, but he was also a citizen of Earth."

"We can't let them get away with this," agreed Laggi, Girl of the Starways. "Give the Toad-Men of Skraax an inch and they'll take a parsec."

"He was evil, but he was AB-Negative," Lexa chimed in. "My favorite flavor!"

Captain Hamster sighed. "You're right. The twenty-four hour automated teller window of Justice never sleeps. Laggi, summon the Hamstarship!"

The little alien pressed her fingertips to her temples and assumed that constipated look which indicates mental telepathy (as opposed to the other kind) in action. A loud humming overhead made the drugstore shudder as a circular section of roof melted away to reveal a hovering spacecraft. A hole irised open in its light-encrusted underbelly and two incredibly long ropes dropped to the ground. While Lexa merely dematerialized and Laggi soared into the ship under her own power, Bongo and Captain Hamster shinnied up hand-over-hand and paw-over-paw in less time than it would take to please the most autocratic of seventh-grade gym teachers. Then the ropes were sucked back into the spacecraft like so much spaghetti, the hole closed, and the mighty Hamstarship spun off into the cosmos.

Mrs. Hanson watched Captain Hamster and the Frenzies go, petulance creasing her brow. "Great, just great," she muttered. "Now who's going to clean up this mess?" And when she said *mess*, she wasn't

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thinking of the wrecked drugstore or the forever-lost cough syrup or the fact that Wayne couldn't possibly sell insurance dressed in a caped leotard and tights. She was thinking of Jimmy.

Jimmy, who in five short years would be a teenager. Jimmy, who would then be ripe for believing any stupid thing his stupid friends told him. Jimmy, who would believe with all his omnipotent heart that his parents were reactionary troglodytes with the brains of cole slaw.

Mrs. Hanson didn't like cole slaw. Something had to be done.

Jimmy was still staring after the vanished Hamstarship when his mother tapped him lightly on the shoulder to reclaim his attention. "Didja see it, Mom?" he exclaimed, whirling around. "Didja see it? Gee, I wish I could've gone with them."

"You can, darling," Mrs. Hanson said.

"Huh?"

"I said yes, you *can* go with Captain Hamster and the Frenzies to fight the Toad-Men of Skraax."

"I *can*?" This from the woman who wouldn't let him bicycle around the block by himself? That guarded look of juvenile skepticism was back on Jimmy's face full force. Mrs. Hanson smiled inwardly. Perfect.

"Sure, you can," she pressed. "It's all up to you. You see, anything you want to happen *will* happen. Now don't give me *that* look, dear, there's a very simple explanation: It's all because that cough syrup I fed you a couple of days ago gave you the power to — "

"It did?" Jimmy scowled. Mrs. Hanson could almost see his thought processes at work: *Magic cough syrup, yeah, right, what does she think I am, a kid! She's just saying this so next time I'll swallow that yucky gunk without holding out for a new Captain Hamster comic. Well, she can't fool me!* With a smug look of complete triumph Jimmy shouted, "That cough syrup didn't do *anything* to me! I don't believe it!" And he meant it, too.

The universe went *poik*, a comprehensive sound-effect that included a lot of retroactive reality-adjustments.

"Did you hear that?" asked Wayne, his old self once more.

"Sounded like a backfire," replied one of the restored FBI agents.

"Since when do backfires go *poik*?" a rehumanized Mr. Dolan wanted to know.

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"I'm sorry, sir," said the other former skink. "You're not cleared to receive that information."

Mrs. Hanson surveyed the results of her ploy and was satisfied. She breathed a great sigh of relief and turned to her son. "Come along, Jimmy, we're going home now."

"Aw, *Mommmm*, do I *haaaaave* to?" Jimmy dodged her outstretched hand and dashed behind the smashed-up soda fountain. Mrs. Hanson shook her head over her headstrong child and gave chase.

The chase was cut short when she stepped on something round and her ankle twisted out from under her. Cursing merrily, she picked up the offending object and was about to hurl it against the farthest wall when she noticed what it was.

It was the discarded cough syrup bottle. A single drop of the fabulous contents glistened on the rim. Dr. Oglethorpe had done his best to drain it dry, but he was a man, not a vacuum pump. Mrs. Hanson caught the drop on her fingertip before it fell and popped it into her mouth.

The structure of DNA unscrolled before her like a runaway sheet of shelf paper. Differential equations rattled through her mind as easily as nursery rhymes. She never had believed what her mother said about girls and math and science. And that was only the beginning. As for some of those women's magazine articles she'd swallowed whole, and those all-wise parenting gurus she'd obeyed without question, and those three or four or fifty-some-odd gentlemen in Foggy Bottom who kept preaching that equal pay was the first step that inevitably led to devouring your young...

For the first time in her life, Mrs. Hanson knew exactly what *she* believed.

Somewhere in the universe the cry rang out: "Duck and cover, boys, here comes Justice. And man, is she ever *pissed!*"

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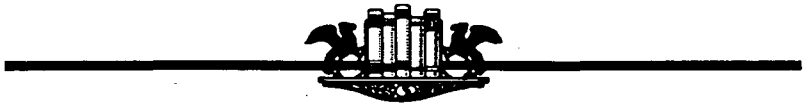

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Spirits of the Ordinary, by Kathleen Alcalá, Chronicle Books, 1997, $22.95

THIS IS AS luminous a novel as it's been my pleasure to read in a while. Set in Mexico during the last century, it's a novel of temperament and quiet beauty, one of those books in which the background landscape and history are as much characters as the cast that wanders through its pages.

The landscape is mostly desert and badlands. At first glance, they seem to be hard and barren places, but as anyone who has spent any time in such landscapes can attest, they brim with secret life. The history is that of Mexico, distilled here to a few specific points of view: Jews trying to keep their faith where their religion is illegal, the treatment of natives by the government and soldiers, the influence of the large mining companies over their employees whose position is no better than that of slaves.

And such a cast. The much put-upon Estelle and her husband Zacarías form their nexus. Zacarías forsakes all, family and career, endlessly prospecting for gold in the mountains, not realizing that the gold he seeks might be of a more spiritual nature than precious metal. Estelle holds her family dearest, yet she is the one to bar her husband from the family home and first seek comfort from another.

Then there are Zacarías's parents: his father Julio struggles to decipher the secrets of the Cabala while his mother Mariana, mute after an encounter with an angel as a child, effortlessly understands and sees the connection that all things have to one another. On Estelle's side of the family there are the twins, Membrillo and Manzana, one a woman, the other a man, and no one can tell which is which, even when they become adults. At fifteen they are taken away into the

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desert to become apprentices of a dowsing witch.

Connected by association are others: the photographer Corey, an American woman traveling through the Southwest disguised as a man so that her sex will not interfere with her ability to practice her art. Magdalena, abused as a child, now a powerful woman controlling her husband's estate. Various natives, soldiers, other family members....

What fascinated me as much as the characters was how Alcalá told her story. Eschewing a traditional linear plot, she focuses, instead, on almost anecdotal glimpses into the lives of her characters, and the story grows out of their cumulative effect. Those glimpses might seem haphazard at first, but the further one gets into the book, the more they resonate against one another. The overall result is a desire in the reader to turn pages as eagerly to find out what happens next as one would in a novel told in a more traditional style.

Ursula K. Le Guin had this to say about Alcalá's short story collection, *Mrs. Vargas and the Dead Naturalist:* "The kingdoms of Borges and García Márquez lie just over the horizon, but this landscape of desert towns and dreaming hearts...is Alcalá-land. It lies just across the border between Mexico and California, across the border between the living and the dead, across all the borders — a true new world."

Spirits of the Ordinary can wear that same descriptive shirt as though the words were tailor-made to fit it as well. For like the stories in the collection, the novel explores borders — those to be found in society and religion and history. In the land and in the hearts of those who inhabit it.

It is a new world. But, as we come to know the characters better and see in their lives reflections of our own, a familiar one as well — only viewed from a new perspective.

Black Swan, White Raven, edited by Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling, Avon Books, 1997, $23.

The editorial team of Datlow and Windling — perhaps best known for their voluminous and exhaustive annual anthology *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* from St. Martin's — doesn't solely limit itself to reprint collections. This fourth volume of their adult fairy tales series from Avon is proof positive that they cast a wider net over our field, harvesting new stories as

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well as those already once-told.

But *The Year's Best* is a hard act to follow. It benefits from being able to choose from the whole of published fiction for any given year, whereas a theme anthology such as *Black Swan, White Raven* is limited both by its theme and the smaller story-pool from which its contents may be chosen. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. The thematic limitations allow the editors to focus more tightly on their subject, distilling it to its essence. But that only works if the contributors understand the boundaries as well.

In their introduction, the editors write that "a close look at the [original] stories reveals much more than a simple formula of abuse and retribution. The trials our heroes encounter in their quests illustrate the *process* of transformation: from youth to adulthood, from victim to hero, from a maimed state into wholeness, from passivity to action." What's fascinating about a fairy tale, and perhaps what gives it its deep resonance, is that it takes us into the dark wood of trial and trouble, and then leads us out again. Not necessarily to a place where all is well, but at least to a place where one can understand the world a little more clearly.

Not all of the stories collected herein do this. Some, while certainly entertaining in their own right such as "Sparks" by Gregory Frost, read more like a tall tale, while others — "In the Insomniac Night" by Joyce Carol Oates is a prime example — take us into the woods and simply leave us there. In fact, I found a large number of stories that could better be classified as anecdotal (folk tale, tall tale) or simply horror, as opposed to a fairy tale. This wouldn't matter one bit in a general fantasy anthology, but it becomes problematic in an anthology such as this since those stories lack the essence of fairy tale, and hence much of their resonance.

I suppose it's all a matter of expectations. When one expects "fairy tales retold with a twist," one doesn't expect the twist to be that they're not fairy tales at all. This becomes all the more pronounced by the pieces that do fit that expectation: Stories like "The Dog Rose" by Sten Westgard and "The True Story" by Pat Murphy take on very familiar material ("Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White," respectively) but tell it to us from an entirely new, and effective, perspective. Bruce Glassco's "True Thomas," while true to the

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original source material, makes sense of the theory that the alien abductions of this century are merely an updating of the fairy abductions in older times. "Steadfast" by Nancy Kress retells "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," giving it a contemporary spin that reminds one not so much of undying love as a stalker's obsession. "Godmother Death" by Jane Yolen (one of the foremost contemporary practitioners of fairy tales) is a timeless variant of the Brothers Grimm story "Godfather Death" and wouldn't have been out-of-place in one of their collections.

They are new versions, but they all work as fairy tales as well, completing the journey of transformation and change, whereas something like "The Reverend's Wife" by Midori Snyder (a hilarious, bawdy version of a Sudanese folk tale reset in rural America) is anecdotal; a long, well-told joke.

Am I being too picayune? Probably. But that's only because I love fairy tales as much as I do and want to see the retold versions retain the power and resonance of the originals upon which they are based, if not the details.

Perhaps it's only a matter of semantics. As an anthology of fantasy stories, *Black Swan, White Raven* is a wonderful collection with a higher-than-usual ratio of excellent stories in its pages, and some lovely verse. But as a collection of retold fairy tales, too many of the contributions fall short of the elements that make the fairy tale of old such an enduring story form.

Reading in the Dark, by Seamus Deane, Knopf, 1996, $23.

Well, I'm rapidly running out of room for this month, but I wanted to get in at least a brief mention of the Irish poet Seamus Deane's first novel, a wonderful exploration of a young boy growing up in the fifties in Derry. It deals with the Troubles, of course, but also with hauntings — both supernatural, and those born out of the old secrets that can lair in a family's history and tear it apart.

The supernatural elements are placed more in the background than they would be in a novel published in our field, but nevertheless are intrinsic to the tale being told. They arise as a part of life, entwined with the history of the people and their land, much in the way such elements are handled in the magical realism of South American writers like Márquez, rather than as startling marvels that North Americans

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would feel compelled to rationalize.

With the interest many fantasy readers have in all things Celtic, some might find it of interest to experience a different take on Yeats's "Celtic twilight" — not in a secondary world setting, or as a quasi-historical, but as it affects a more realistic storyline in contemporary times. It's also a terrific read, with Deane in top form: earthy, lyrical, and sensitive to the nuances of Irish life among the working poor.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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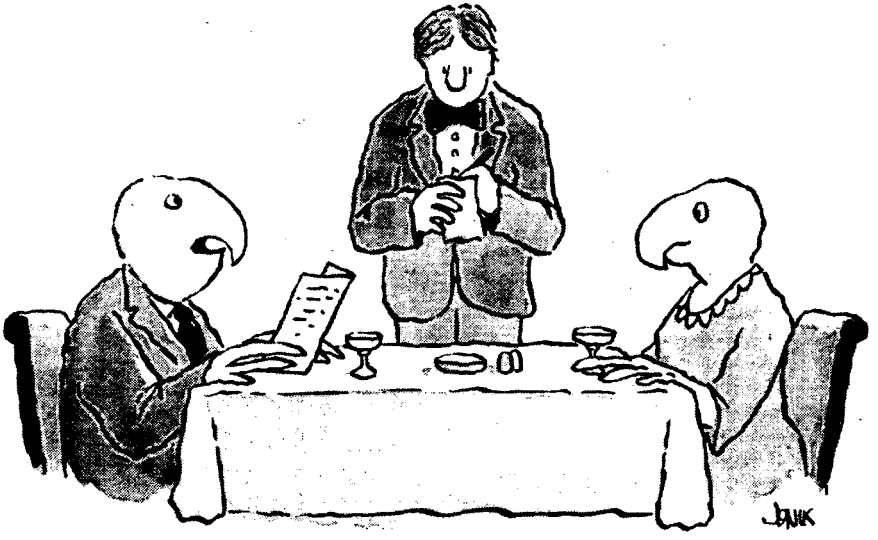

"We've decided to try number fourteen...the assorted crackers."

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

Zod Wallop, by William Browning Spencer, Borealis, 1997, $5.99.

Otherland: City of Golden Shadow, by Tad Williams, DAW, January 1997, $24.95.

Interesting Times, by Terry Pratchett, HarperPrism, April 1997, $22.00.

WHEN I WAS a child — and I am reminded of this because I'm sitting at the kitchen table as I write, torn between thoughts of examining both the fiction I read and the way I read it, and playing with playdoh when my son demands some attention — I reacted to everyone I met instantly. I either loved them and was willing to lay down my life and most of my worldly possessions for them, or I hated them and would run off and hide my things. I had a sense of whom I trusted, of whom I could trust, and of whom I could not. Age, or rather the experience that comes with age, has taught me that that reaction is not always correct, but it's correct often enough that it's a struggle to sit on instincts that are as old as I am.

Now, there are people I meet who fascinate me even if they repel; there are people with whom I'll share laughter, food, time; there are people who I will measure my achievements against because I need a yardstick against which to measure, a goal to struggle for; there are attractive people, ugly people, each on several levels that would take too long to explain here.

And there are, rarer now than ever, people I meet that I trust. That I'd leave my child with, that I'd tell not only the dimming secrets of my past — the past, after all, has shaped me but it doesn't live to anchor or disturb or control me — but more, the secrets of my present, the worries that run my life day-to-day, and more important, more guarded, the things that make me joyful.

I open up to them. I act and react with vulnerability.

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And I've begun to realize that I react to books in the same way that I react to people. There are some that are fun, and I want fun, I want escape, enjoyment, a good story — a night out with the gang. There are some that are beautiful, the way actors or actresses are beautiful — distantly, perfectly, ideally. There are some that are repellent, but I read them because I have to finish them — compulsive reader that I am — I have to know.

And then there are books that I trust. Note that I say books; the relationship with and to the printed word solely defines itself. I don't know these authors, although I have met maybe one or two of them in passing and would (possibly) recognize faces. I know what they've written. I know the text. And that's what I trust: the text.

There's an old test of trust, a game I used to play when I was younger: Go out with a friend, downtown, someplace crowded, noisy. Close your eyes. Follow his instructions. Don't peek. Do this for a while and instead of bunching up your shoulders or forcing your eyes to stay shut, you relax into the rhythm of someone else's voice; you listen to the things that you normally don't pay attention to. You don't know where you're going. But you know that you'll get there, if not without doubt or the occasional high curb into traffic or stubbed toe, then safely. You let yourself believe.

Believe, and you can be hurt by things that broadside you. But sometimes life hurts, and you accept that, and you keep going because it isn't all hurt.

The following three books are novels that I trusted, and for that reason, they're vivid to me, they're lived in because I've taken them in, let them make themselves completely at home.

I started to think about this because of *Zod Wallop*, by William Browning Spencer. I read this book and I was astonished because I had expected it to be something entirely different. Gonzo. Weird. Wild. The cover itself is lovely, very literate-genre in look; it sounds arch, intelligent, witty.

It is all of these things. But that's not why I was astonished by it. I began it with false expectations. A bunch of escapees from an asylum, Raymond Story chief among them, have a very unusual wedding before escaping into the horizon. I thought, from the opening chapter, that it would be a lark — a perfectly worded, affectionately

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humorous, unpredictable lark. But the moment I ran into the reclusive author of children's books, Harry Gainesborough, I lost that sense of the book I'd thought I was reading. Because it was perfectly clear that he'd lost someone very important to him, and it became clearer and clearer as the chapters fell into the past that that someone was his young child.

There is no nightmare worse than that, for me. I cannot conceive of a greater loss. This is one of the journeys that I do not willingly or easily take, and yet — and yet — I kept on reading because there was something about *Zod Wallop* that I trusted.

I could tell you about the brilliant structure of the book, the way the text and subtext blend in such a rare and perfect way; the way all the craziness dovetails into a whole that both explains and defies explanations — but that's not what I loved about the book, not what I love about it now.

There are friends who care about you, and they do what they can to distract you when you're grieving. But they're not comfortable with the grief itself; they won't walk with you into that territory, and through it, because they can't. And you won't ask for it, because you know what it costs. Most books are rather like that. This book has a tremendous heart to it, a warmth, a strength that is gentle enough to understand grief, to walk through its heart, and to take you out the other end by the only possible door: love and acceptance.

I don't cry with grief when I read; I don't know why; possibly because I protect myself too well from it in real life. But I cry with joy, when tears can be got from me at all, and I cried at this one. I want everyone to read it.

Tad Williams is best known for his fantasy trilogy (or tetralogy, if you count by paperback), *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* (although for some reason, at the store, it's called the "Dragonbone Chair trilogy" by most customers. Go figure). Therefore his new book presents readers on either side of the fantasy/sf fence with a bit of a problem. Many of his fantasy readers are afraid that the excursion into cybernet territory will deprive them of what they liked in his fantasy: his strong understanding of the tropes of the truly mythic coming-of-age quest, of the magic that resides within the special effects, of the breadth and depth of a new and strange place, where wars are fought more often than not

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over things that are greater than mere life and death.

Many sf readers, on the other hand, look at the book and think, oh, Tad Williams, that fantasy writer. I'm not certain why, but fantasy readers, while often avoiding sf, don't waste much time decrying its existence; the same is less true, in my admittedly narrow experience, in the other direction.

Both of these groups of people are doing Tad Williams a great disservice.

Having said that, I will quickly say this of myself as a reader: I dislike cyberpunk in general. Reading it, I am often impressed by the depth of style and skill displayed, but unmoved by the depth of thought and detail. I find myself, more often than not, saying, "Oh, get real" when reading because my own suspension of disbelief won't allow me not to snort at how computers have often been used in fiction. There's often so little thought about social context, and what social context there is is fringe, adolescent life (regardless of the age of the characters). I'm not much of a nihilist, sadly; I can't believe the extrapolation.

Having said that, I will now say this. I trust this book. Williams has done such a subtle and convincing job of extrapolating a future internet at the beginning of his book that the knee-jerk tendency on my part to be thrown out of a book, again and again, because I'd rather read about magic than computers-used-as-magic, was completely disabled. Certainly there's a fringe to the world he's created, but he's concerned with the real, day-to-day life of people who are not unlike me: working to get by, living up to the responsibility of dependents, tied to their families by loyalties that are often alloyed and dangerous. Renie Sulaweyo is a teacher at the university. Her father, Joseph, drinks too much; her brother, as any young school-aged boy, is caught up in pranks on the internet, hanging out in the virtual domain with his friends, and getting into the things adolescent boys will get into.

She has a student, !Xabbu, a bushman, one of the last of his kind to have been raised as a hunter, a gatherer, a trapper. He has come to Renie to learn how to manipulate the medium in which she's made her academic career: computer simulation. Virtual reality.

Across the world — literally — in America, a young man playing Thargar the barbarian in the virtual realm of the Middle Kingdom, with

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his sidekick Fredericks the thief, is about to be sucked into the same vortex that has hold of Renie Sulaweyo's life, to be drawn into the same danger, possibly the same death.

What Williams is doing here is inventing a myth using tropes that yield the possibility of its truth, rather than going back to the source of his earlier fantasy, which is no mean feat. He's using the heroes of this age — the people who are struggling, day-to-day, with life; who are becoming involved in the conflict not because they see the great evil looming on the horizon (although it is there), but rather because they see the cost in inactivity: The loss of the lives of their friends, the inexplicable coma of members of their families. Loyalties and old ties, the fabric of life in the new age.

Williams's handling of contemporary characters reminds me, in places, of Robert Charles Wilson's; both are capable of opening up a character to that flash of understanding in a deft, graceful paragraph. The characters are real enough to make the world real. This is the best thing Williams has ever done, and it deserves attention, time, praise. More, it deserves to be read.

* * *

The last book of the three is *Interesting Times*, the latest U.S. installment of Pratchett's long-running discworld series.

A sense of humor, as I've said before, is a dangerous thing, and ill-used it corrodes. Humor is one of the things I least trust, oddly enough, because it's the things that we laugh at, more than the things that we cry at, that define us. I confess, right now, that I did not laugh at *Pulp Fiction*. I couldn't watch *A Clockwork Orange* because the audience was laughing at the things that I found most sickening, and I couldn't deal with their reaction; at fifteen, I could barely deal with my own, but I was damned certain that I wasn't going to find my way to theirs. Perhaps this wasn't the wisest of vows; I think the vows one makes at fifteen probably never are. Unfortunately, that one of all of them stuck.

Interesting Times is a book with which I can laugh. Rincewind — who I was going to say reminds me of Marvin the paranoid android, but with hysteria, fear and emotion, but I suppose that would make him nothing at all like Marvin — is as usual being buffeted around by fate, luggage, the Unseen University, butterflies, and Cohen the octogenarian barbarian with his new,

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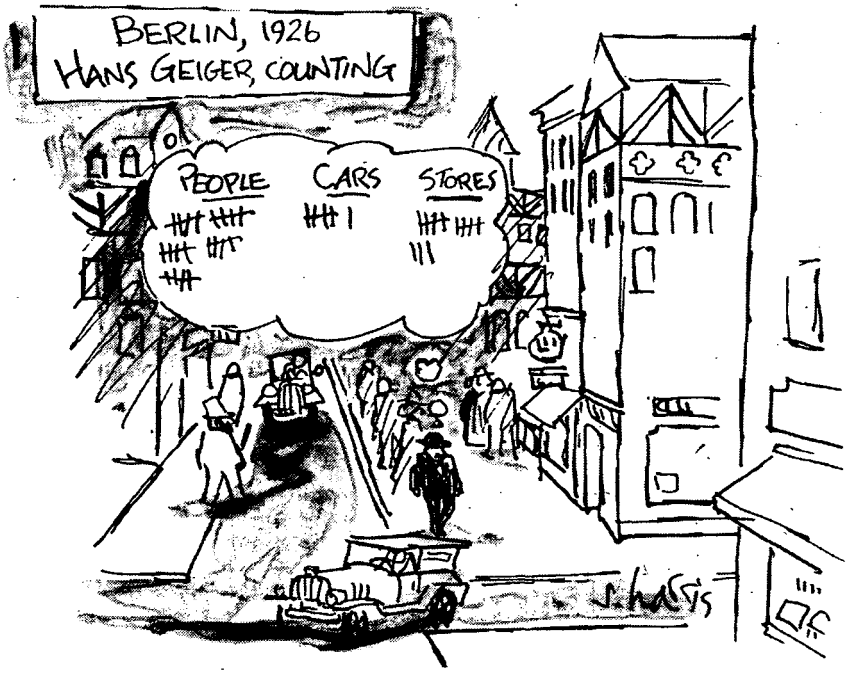
aged horde. They all wind up on the counterweight continent, at the machinations of a very adept man, the perfect politician. I thought, at first, that he was a match for Ankh-Morpork's Vetinari, but there are differences which do become increasingly apparent as the book continues.

Pratchett's turn of phrase is often very British, which leads people to question his humor in the U.S. market. Bullocks, says I. He is genuinely witty, with a very clear eye for the behavior of his fellow simian-descendents, and if I, who have very little in the way of humor, find him funny, anyone can.

Perfect Sunday afternoon reading, with just enough of a point rolled into the humor itself that it manages in places to touch you when you're not watching for it. Be prepared, though, to read out all the funny bits when your spouse keeps coming into the room you're curled up in because he can hear you laughing and wants to know at what.



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EDITOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

I REMEMBER being underwhelmed by Robert Silverberg's *Lord Valentine's Castle* when I first read it in the early 1980s, so I was pleased to find how vividly the whole story swept back upon me as soon as I started reading *Sorcerers of Majipoor* (HarperPrism). One mention of the Pontifex brought back the Labyrinth and the grand parade across the planet Majipoor...and when I looked up I realized I was 150 pages into the new novel. Silverberg's narrative style tends to be cool (which may be why I was underwhelmed in my youth) but the story here is rich and involving.

On an entirely different note, *The Ruby Tear* (Forge) is a fun contemporary vampire story revolving around a theatrical production entitled *The Jewel*. The author, Rebecca Brand, writes smoothly and plays well with the conventions of the gothic, which isn't too surprising when one realizes Ms. Brand is a pseudonym for Suzy McKee Charnas, who obviously enjoyed writing the book. You'll enjoy reading it.

I mean it as high praise when I say that Jack McDevitt's books keep reminding me of Clifford Simak's work — both writers have a great hand for depicting down-to-earth characters caught up in stories that evoke a real sense of wonder. McDevitt's latest, *Eternity Road* (HarperPrism), shows us our own civilization in ruins in the far future and characters who really understand the value of a book.

For a much different vision of our civilization in ruins — or crumbling, anyway — take a look at Steve Erickson's *American Nomad* (Henry Holt), a nonfiction book that set out to cover the 1996 presidential election and ends up covering both Erickson's psychic landscape and America's. Erickson has pursued his hallucinatory vision through novels like *Days Between Station* and *Rubicon Beach*, but in some ways this book feels more

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like a Philip K. Dick novel than any of those books do. The catch, of course, is that the book's strange world is our reality.

One of science fiction's greatest scholars, Sam Moskowitz, passed away recently, and in his memory I reread his *Explorers of the Infinite: Shapers of Science Fiction* (World Publishing, 1963). The essays here ably lay out an accurate history of the science fiction genre, tracing the influences of Poe, Verne, Wells, and lesser-known writers (when was the last time you heard mention of Luis Philip Senarens or the Frank Reade, Jr., books?) and document the early years of SF in great detail. Sam Moskowitz loved science fiction and gave his all to celebrate it. Consider these final words from the book, now more than three decades old:

> Its [science fiction's] writers have been floundering, but veterans of the field feel confident that science fiction will right itself, take direction and assume the role it is best suited for: the dramatic presentation of *new* scientific concepts and the social, psychological, and philosophical consequences of those ideas.

This assessment of the field seems equally applicable today and bespeaks a healthy future for science fiction; Sam Moskowitz showed us so very much of where it has been.

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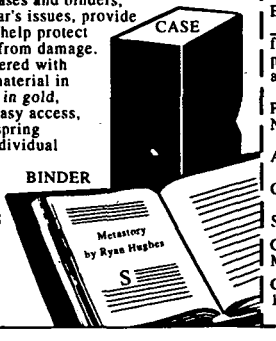

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The more things change, the more they stay the same. Or do they? Two time travelers will find out for themselves in the latest story from the prolific author of Mars, Brothers, *and many other novels and works of nonfiction.*

The Café Coup

By Ben Bova

PARIS WAS NOT FRIENDLY to Americans in the soft springtime of 1922. The French didn't care much for the English, either, and they hated the victorious Germans, of course.

I couldn't blame them very much. The Great War had been over for more than three years, yet Paris had still not recovered its gaiety, its light and color, despite the hordes of boisterous German tourists who spent so freely on the boulevards. More likely, because of them.

I sat in one of the crowded sidewalk cafés beneath a splendid warm sun, waiting for my lovely wife to show up. Because of all the Germans, I was forced to share my minuscule round table with a tall, gaunt Frenchman who looked me over with suspicious eyes.

"You are an American?" he asked, looking down his prominent nose at me. His accent was worse than mine, certainly not Parisian.

"No," I answered truthfully. Then I lied, "I'm from New Zealand." It was as far away in distance as my real birthplace was in time.

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"Ah," he said with an exhalation of breath that was somewhere between a sigh and a snort. "Your countrymen fought well at Gallipoli. Were you there?"

"No," I said. "I was too young."

That apparently puzzled him. Obviously I was of an age to fight in the Great War. But in fact, I hadn't been born when the British Empire troops were decimated at Gallipoli. I hadn't been born in the twentieth century at all.

"Were you in the war?" I asked needlessly.

"But certainly. To the very last moment I fought the Boche."

"It was a great tragedy."

"The Americans betrayed us," he muttered.

My brows rose a few millimeters. He was quite tall for a Frenchman, but painfully thin. Half starved. Even his eyes looked hungry. The inflation, of course. It cost a basketful of francs, literally, to buy a loaf of bread. I wondered how he could afford the price of an aperitif. Despite the warm afternoon he had wrapped himself in a shabby old leather coat, worn shiny at the elbows.

From what I could see there were hardly any Frenchmen in the café; mostly raucous Germans roaring with laughter and heartily pounding on the little tables as they bellowed for more beer. To my amazement, the waiters had learned to speak German.

"Wilson," my companion continued bitterly. "He had the gall to speak of Lafayette."

"I thought that the American president was the one who arranged the armistice."

"Yes, with his fourteen points. Fourteen daggers plunged into the heart of France."

"Really?"

"The Americans should have entered the war on our side! Instead they sat idly by and watched us bleed to death while their bankers extorted every gram of gold we possessed."

"But the Americans had no reason to go to war," I protested mildly.

"France needed them! When their pitiful little colonies rebelled against the British lion, France was the only nation to come to their aid. They owe their existence to France, yet when we needed them they turned their backs on us."

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That was largely my fault, although he didn't know it. I averted the sinking of the *Lusitania* by the German U-boat. It took enormous energies, but my darling wife arranged it so that the *Lusitania* was crawling along at a mere five knots that fateful morning. I convinced Lieutenant Walther Schwieger, skipper of the *U-20*, that it was safe enough to surface and hold the British liner captive with the deck gun while a boarding party searched for the ammunition that I knew the English had stored aboard her.

The entire affair was handled with great tact and honor. No shots were fired, no lives were lost, and the 123 American passengers arrived safely in Liverpool with glowing stories of how correct, how chivalrous, the German U-boat sailors had been. America remained neutral throughout the Great War. Indeed, a good deal of anti-British sentiment swept the United States, especially the midwest, when their newspapers reported that the British were transporting military contraband in secret and thus risking the lives of American passengers.

"Well," I said, beckoning to the waiter for two more Pernods, "the war is over and we must face the future as best we can."

"Yes," said my companion gloomily. "I agree."

One group of burly Germans was being particularly obnoxious, singing bawdy songs as they waved their beer glasses to and fro, slopping the foaming beer on themselves and their neighboring tables. No one complained. No one dared to say a word. The German army still occupied much of France.

My companion's face was white with fury. Yet even he restrained himself. But I noticed that he glanced at the watch on his wrist every few moments, as if he were expecting someone. Or something.

If anyone had betrayed France, it was I. The world that I had been born into was a cesspool of violence and hate, crumbling into tribal savagery all across the globe. Only a few oases of safety existed, tucked in remote areas far from the filthy, disease-ridden cities and the swarms of ignorant, vicious monsters who raped and murdered until they themselves were raped and murdered.

Once they discovered our solar-powered city, tucked high in the Sierra Oriental, I knew that the end was near. Stupidly, they attacked us, like a wild barbarian horde. We slaughtered them with laser beams and heat-seeking bullets. Instead of driving them away, that only whetted their appetite.

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Their survivors laid siege to our mountaintop. We laughed, at first, to think their pitiful handful of ragged ignoramuses could overcome our walled city, with its high-tech weaponry and endless energy from the sun. Yet somehow they spread the word to others of their kind. Day after day we watched their numbers grow, a tattered, threadbare pack of rats surrounding us, watching, waiting until their numbers were so huge they could swarm us under despite our weapons.

They were united in their bloodlust and their greed. They saw loot and power on our mountaintop and they wanted both. At night I could see their campfires down below us, like the red eyes of rats watching and waiting.

Our council was divided. Some urged that we sally out against the besiegers, attack them and drive them away. But it was already too late for that. Their numbers were far too large, and even if we drove them away they would return, now that they knew we existed.

Others wanted to flee into space, to leave Earth altogether and build colonies off the planet. We had the technology to build and maintain the solar power satellites, they pointed out. It was only one technological step farther to build habitats in space.

But when we put the numbers through a computer analysis, it showed that to build a habitat large enough to house us all permanently would be beyond our current resources — and we could not enlarge our resource base as long as we were encircled by the barbarians.

I had worked on the time translator since my student days. It took enormous energy to move objects through time, far too much for all of us to escape that way. Yet I saw a possibility of hope.

If I could find a nexus, a pivotal point in time, perhaps I could change the world. Perhaps I could alter events to such an extent that this miserable world of terror and pain would dissolve, disappear, and a better world replace it. I became obsessed with the possibility.

"But you'll destroy *this* world," my wife gasped, shocked when I finally told her of my scheme.

"What of it?" I snapped. "Is this world so delightful that you want it to continue?"

She sank wearily onto the lab bench. "What will happen to our families? Our friends? What will happen to us?"

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"You and I will make the translation. We will live in an earlier, better time."

"And the others?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. The mathematics isn't clear. But even if they disappear, the world that replaces them in this time will be better than the world we're in now."

"Do you really think so?"

"We'll *make* it better!"

The fools on the council disagreed, naturally. No one had translated through time, they pointed out. The energy even for a preliminary experiment would be prohibitively high. We needed that energy for our weapons.

None of them believed I could change a thing. They weren't afraid that they would be erased from existence, their world line snuffed out like a candle flame. No, in their blind ignorance they insisted that an attempt at time translation would consume so much energy that we would be left defenseless against the besieging savages outside our walls.

"The savages will no longer exist," I told them. "*None* of this world line will exist, once I've made the proper change in the world line."

They voted me down. They would rather face the barbarians than give up their existence, even if it meant a better world would replace the one they knew.

I accepted their judgment outwardly. Inwardly I became the most passionate student of history of all time. Feverishly I searched the books and tapes, seeking the nexus, the turning point, the place where I could make the world change for the better. I knew I had only a few months; the savage horde below our mountaintop was growing and stirring. I could hear their murmuring dirge of hate even through the walls of my laboratory, like the growls of a pack of wild beasts. Every day it grew louder, more insistent.

It was the war in the middle of the twentieth century that started the world's descent into madness. A man called Adolph Hitler escalated the horror of war to new levels of inhumanity. Not only did he deliberately murder millions of civilian men, women and children; he destroyed his own country, screaming with his last breath that the Aryan race deserved to be wiped out if they could not conquer the world.

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When I first realized the enormity of Hitler's rage I sat stunned for an entire day. Here was the model, the prototype, for the brutal, cruel, ruthless, sadistic monsters who ranged my world seeking blood.

Before Hitler, war was a senseless affront to civilized men and women. Soldiers were tolerated, at best; often despised. They were usually shunned in polite society. After Hitler, war was commonplace, genocide routine, nuclear weapons valued for the megadeaths they could generate.

Hitler and all he stood for was the edge of the precipice, the first terrible step into the abyss that my world had plunged into. If I could prevent Hitler from coming to power, perhaps prevent him from ever being born, I might save my world — or at least erase it and replace it with a better one.

For days on end I thought of how I might translate back in time to kill this madman or even prevent his birth. Slowly, however, I began to realize that this single man was not the cause of it all. If Hitler had never been born, someone else would have arisen in Germany after the Great War, someone else would have unified the German people in a lust for revenge against those who had betrayed and defeated them, someone else would have preached Aryan purity and hatred of all other races, someone else would have plunged civilization into World War II.

To solve the problem of Hitler I had to go to the root causes of the Nazi program: Germany's defeat in the first world war, the war that was called the Great War by those who lived through it. I had to make Germany win that war.

If Germany had won World War I, there would have been no humiliation of the German people, no thirst for revenge, no economic collapse. Hitler would still exist, but he would be a retired soldier, perhaps a peaceful painter or even a minor functionary in the Kaiser's government. There would be no World War II.

And so I set my plans to make Germany the victor in the Great War, with the reluctant help of my dear wife.

"You would defy the council?" she asked me, shocked when I revealed my determination to her.

"Only if you help me," I said. "I won't go unless you go with me."

She fully understood that we would never be able to return to our own world. To do so, we would have to bring the components for a translator

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with us and then assemble it in the early twentieth century. Even if we could do that, where would we find a power source in those primitive years? They were still using horses then.

Besides, our world would be gone, vanished, erased from spacetime.

"We'll live out our lives in the twentieth century," I told her. "And we'll know that our own time will be far better than it is now."

"How can you be sure it will be better?" she asked me softly.

I smiled patiently. "There will be no World War II. Europe will be peaceful for the rest of the century. Commerce and art will flourish. Even the Russian communists will join the European federation peacefully, toward the end of the century."

"You're certain?"

"I've run the analysis on the master computer a dozen times. I'm absolutely certain."

"And our own time will be better?"

"It has to be. How could it possibly be worse?"

She nodded, her beautiful face solemn with the understanding that we were leaving our world forever. Good riddance to it, I thought. But it was the only world we had ever known, and she was not happy to toss it away deliberately and spend the rest of her life in a bygone century.

Still, she never hesitated about coming with me. I wouldn't go without her, she knew that. And I knew that she wouldn't let me go unless she came with me.

"It's really quite romantic, isn't it?" she asked me, the night before we left.

"What is?"

"Translating across time together. Our love will span the centuries."

I held her close. "Yes. Across the centuries."

Before sunrise the next morning we stole into the laboratory and powered up the translator. No one was on guard, no one was there to try to stop us. The council members were all sleeping, totally unaware that one of their loyal citizens was about to defy their decision. There were no renegades among us, no rebels. We had always accepted the council's decisions and worked together for our mutual survival.

Until now. My wife silently took her place on the translator's focal stage while I made the final adjustments to the controls. She looked

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radiant standing there, her face grave, her golden hair glowing against the darkened laboratory shadows.

At last I stepped up beside her. I took her hand; it was cold with anxiety. I squeezed her hand confidently.

"We're going to make a better world," I whispered to her.

The last thing I saw was the pink glow of dawn rising over the eastern mountains, framed in the lab's only window.

Now, in the Paris of 1922 that I had created, victorious Germany ruled Europe with strict but civilized authority. The Kaiser had been quite lenient with Great Britain; after all, was he not related by blood to the British king? Even France got off relatively lightly, far more lightly than the unlucky Russians. Germany kept Alsace-Lorraine, of course, but took no other territory.

France's punishment was mainly financial: Germany demanded huge, crippling reparations. The real humiliation was that France was forced to disarm. The proud French army was reduced to a few regiments and forbidden modern armaments such as tanks and airplanes. The Parisian police force was better equipped.

My companion glanced at his watch again. It was the type that the army had issued to its officers, I saw.

"Could you tell me the time?" I asked, over the drunken singing of the German tourists. My wife was late, and that was quite unlike her.

He paid no attention to me. Staring furiously at the Germans who surrounded us, he suddenly shot to his feet and shouted, "Men of France! How long shall we endure this humiliation?"

He was so tall and lean that he looked like a human Eiffel Tower standing among the crowded sidewalk tables. He had a pistol in his hand. One of the waiters was so surprised by his outburst that he dropped his tray. It clattered to the pavement with a crash of shattered glassware.

But others were not surprised, I saw. More than a dozen men leaped up and shouted, "Vive La France!" They were all dressed in old army uniforms, as was my companion, beneath his frayed leather coat. They were all armed; a few of them even had rifles.

Absolute silence reigned. The Germans stared, dumbfounded. The waiters froze in their tracks. I certainly didn't know what to say or do. My

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only thought was of my beautiful wife; where was she, why was she late, was there some sort of insurrection going on? Was she safe?

"Follow me!" said the tall Frenchman to his armed compatriots. Despite every instinct in me, I struggled to my feet and went along with them.

From cafés on both sides of the wide boulevard armed men were striding purposefully toward their leader. He marched straight ahead, right down the middle of the street, looking neither to the right nor left. They formed up behind him, some two or three dozen men.

Breathlessly, I followed along.

"To the Elysée!" shouted the tall one, striding determinedly on his long legs, never glancing back to see if the others were following him.

Then I saw my wife pushing through the curious onlookers thronging the sidewalks. I called to her and she ran to me, blonde and slim and more lovely than anyone in all of spacetime.

"What is it?" she asked, as breathless as I. "What's happening?"

"Some sort of coup, I think."

"They have guns!"

"Yes."

"We should get inside. If there's shooting — "

"No, we'll be all right," I said. "I want to see what's going to happen."

It was a coup, all right. But it failed miserably. Apparently the tall one, a fanatical ex-major named de Gaulle, believed that his little band of followers could capture the government. He depended on a certain General Pétain, who had the prestige and authority that de Gaulle himself lacked.

Pétain lost his nerve at the critical moment, however, and abandoned the coup. The police and a detachment of army troops were waiting for the rebels at the Petit Palace; a few shots were exchanged. Before the smoke had drifted away the rebels had scattered and de Gaulle himself was taken into custody.

"He will be charged with treason, I imagine," I said to my darling wife as we sat that evening at the very same sidewalk café. The very same table, in fact.

"I doubt that they'll give him more than a slap on the wrist," she said. "He seems to be a hero to everyone in Paris."

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"Not to the Germans," I said.

She smiled at me. "The Germans take him as a joke." She understood German perfectly and could eavesdrop on their shouted conversations quite easily.

"He is no joke."

We both turned to the dark little man sitting at the next table; we were packed in so close that his chair almost touched mine. He was a particularly ugly man, with lank black hair and the swarthy face of a born conspirator. His eyes were small, reptilian, and his upper lip was twisted by a curving scar.

"Charles de Gaulle will be the savior of France," he said. He was absolutely serious. Grim, even.

"If he's not guillotined for treason," I replied lightly. Yet inwardly I began to tremble.

"You were here. You saw how he rallied the men of France."

"All two dozen of them," I quipped.

He looked at me with angry eyes. "Next time it will be different. We will not rely on cowards and turncoats like Pétain. Next time we will take the government and bring all of France under his leadership. Then..."

He hesitated, glancing around as if the police might be listening.

"Then?" my wife coaxed.

He lowered his voice. "Then revenge on Germany and all the those who betrayed us."

"You can't be serious."

"You'll see. Next time we will win. Next time we will have all of France with us. And then all of Europe. And then, the world."

My jaw must have dropped. It was all going to happen anyway. The French would re-arm. Led by a ruthless, fanatical de Gaulle, they would plunge Europe into a second world war. All my efforts were for nothing. The world that we had left would continue to exist — or be even worse.

He turned his reptilian eyes to my lovely wife. Although many of the German women were blonde, she was far more beautiful than any of them.

"You are Aryan?" he asked, his tone suddenly menacing.

She was nonplussed. "Aryan? I don't understand."

"Yes you do," he said, almost hissing the words. "Next time it will go hard on the Aryans. You'll see."

I sank my head in my hands and wept openly.

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David Bunch's highly unusual, highly distinctive, highly odd *stories have been assembled in* Moderan *and more recently in* Bunch! *He lives in St. Louis and views the world in a very strange manner. Witness the following modest proposal concerning ploughshares and swords and mergers thereof.*

A Saint George Pens a Note to His Dragons (Disclosures and Offers)

By David R. Bunch

DRAGONS! ALL!! FROM THIS table in this room, where I sit long at rest and much in pondering, after the lateliest (and wearying) ride of the Guardsman's rounds, I would write to you. I have some disclosures that I'd like to share [with you], leading to bright offers of the most extraordinary! dimensions!! But first — I grapple-and-lock a burden that I *have* to cast afar — from God, through me-and-you — and burst-to-wide the very Gates of Sin! on Conscience Dungeon: *I'm really only a part-time Saint Knight World Guardian for Dragon-Threats (SKWGFDT). There are other, and many-counted very bad things that I do, some even having to do with smoke and flame and roars — your trademarks! — (On my best [pious] day of all in the Guardians, I still scored "not perfect" [not "saintly" enough]).*

Are you surprised — DRAGONS?! I am prepared to accept that you are [surprised], at *this*, coming from ME (a Saint George), to YOU —

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considering my "saintliness," my relentlessness, my record to date [overall], and the fact that *I* have hunted *you* on all the fields known to Western Civilized Man. Pursued you almost as if you were, completely, Sin itself. — NOW DRAGONS, if some of you, or even all of you, have a like Surprise to spring, and would wish to "come out," burst right forth right now! and "rip to tatters" the Cave Dark (in a manner of speaking), being only part-time Dragons (closet [cave!] Good Guys), and long I have surmised this might be so, I swear I'll listen to you say: "I HAVE A BETTER SIDE!"

And I feel I should take heed the blotching [pussed dark marks] of my soul and make confession, here at my time of trying to BE what I am driven finally to [be], (and conscience shrieking under the ceaseless flog): *Sometimes, even with your blood still wetting darker that contended ground where I had felled you, while of your proud-fighter's fire (your born-of-Nature burning), there remained only the thinnest gossamer strands of the smoke of dying — I had questioned [ME]: Have I conquered a really old-bad Dragon, an all-wrong Ogre, a completely depraved and no-hopes-for-redemption Reptile? Or should not we, somehow between us [long ago], have arranged ourselves toward some better mindset and an accommodation of our differing ways? Each for the other? Rather than for ME/YOU to try to slay US, or by other means attempt to overcome US — all the days?*

Let me toss three questions out there at you then — while a groom rubs down, curries and feeds my old Horse of War, and my armor (heavy and salting-raw-sores hot in summer and in winter the like load clammy and cold) lies now as busy insect housing in the grass beneath a tree. My tough shield leans at that same tree, near to my armor (likewise my great sword and my Dragon lance), and on that shield where it rests, caught in the dapple-shade of a middle-summer afternoon, raw marks (slashed in!) in the dented steel all-clearly tell the price of fights. (And starkly too they witness that I rode [or, burly-rough and lanceless stood and "fought the sword"], many Blood Days — while the Courts of Death ruled sternly on the depths-and-skills of wounds [on the Dragon-Claws Fields].) — Horse, armor, lance, sword, shield, Death — and you, Dragons — have these not been *our* Life and Times...the World's Life and Times...too often, too much of days, too many nights...brave and unkind...? Question number

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two: Though myriad the long, and countless the wasted, hours of our contending, are we not [essentially] exactly where we were — WHERE WE WERE — lance points out, claws set for carving...all [of us] too ready to BE-at-War — that Anger which exalts "dying from one's wounds" and inters entire generations? And Question numbering three: Should not the just above TELL US SOMETHING TO THINK A WHOLE LOT ABOUT, DRAGONS?

SO — let US take time free from our Conflict Times to have ourselves a party! — an Others-understanding celebration! one of fun and also full of fellowship and mellow good regard for the feelings of Everything that breathes of Life in the Great Room of our coming together. Oh, there we'll be! self-proclaimed Saints and world-wreck-it-down Dragons, ready to laugh and yell, josh it up for fun and play games — together! What a sight! THAT'll make — self-appointed Saint Knights [world-guardian], now unarmed, our armor and shields and sword/lances all heaped in a for-junk-room pile; and Dragons [with their flames down-doused to a glow] just horsing around and being jovial.

Plainly to show [in a much-clearer-than-hint self-abasement] that *I* mean this closely, I'll bring the Saint George dart boards, those that I wrested from your cruelest Dragon's cave one furious questing kill-fiercest afternoon I caught him where he chortled and Dragon-crowed at killing my! head, *my* saintly head! all the way off. Fang-darts and clawdaggers were splintery mayhem — right through the lumber! — And *you* too can play the dart-board games at my "drawn pretty" head [all in sport of course] at this Others-understanding party we are going to have, and I'll just smile you friendly. And maybe I'll get back at you with some neat-clean-new parlor tricks to do with smoke and flame and roars — your forte [but all fun stuff [NOW], no burn-downs], that you will teach —

LET'S DO IT, DRAGONS! What have we to lose? What we have done as hostiles all these dying-and-wounded warring centuries — BATTLED — has not brought forth a better world one tittle. We are still at kill-kill odds, and please understand me, One-and-All, when I cry: THINGS DO BUT GET ODDER ALL THE TIME! I do not shout to jest.

DO let me hear [the soonest that you can], Dragons! — old familiar Monsters/Enemies that after all-these-years of close-fight and sore-hurt must seem almost, or quite! my other living selves — and nearly beloved.

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Reply about the main-line points I make and my offer to stop fighting. — An Others-understanding get-together? WELL — *that* certainly can't kill us any more perilously than we already are. Can it?!

(Gifts follow for all the little Dragons.)
Yours, George,
SKWGFDT — (retired)

"Would I blow smoke!"

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Jo Clayton is the author of more than two dozen SF and fantasy novels, the most recent of which is Drum Warning. *Her next novel,* Drum Calls, *is due out any day now. Her science fiction novels tend to be characterized by their vivid and imaginative depictions of alien life and worlds, as can easily be seen in the following tale of alien ritual and human emotion.*

Borrowed Light

By Jo Clayton

1. The awakening

"YOU ARE NOT MY FIRST death," Tsoylan sang to she who lay on the sleeping platform, her breath barely stirring the air, a stranger odd and angular, paler even than the Great Mother. When the Name came into his head, evoking Her image and the Fear, he cupped his stubby hands over his eyes in the ritual see-me-not gesture, forgetting the dark spectacles and knocking them away.

When his heart flutters stopped, he groped about the tile floor until he found them and fumbled them back on. Even with the dark lenses, his eyes had hurt since the beginning of this vigil, the tear ducts suppurating from the stress of sunlight like yellow acid streaming into the room. The healers said that was what the alien needed. Like the sowy, they said, she drinks from the sun and darkness starves her.

"You are not my first death," he sang.

"Nor the first whose rushing breath
Becomes a shout,
I won't. I will not go...."

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Her eyes opened and Tsoylan stopped his song. "Kara Stavokal," he said, speaking slowly to make sure she understood. "Do not be afraid. It is fate that wounded you, not we."

He watched her head turn, her hands fumble about as if by touching the padded platform and the sheet pulled over her, she could call her soul from wherever it had fled. Her eyes gained focus, her groping stopped, and she began trying out her body much as a Talq would test a machine, moving part against part, evaluating the results. When she was satisfied, she swung her legs over the edge of the platform and stood up.

She swayed, steadied herself. Her breathing slowed.

The healers had dressed her in a white shift that came to her knees and left her arms bare. The hair on those arms was so fine he wouldn't have known it was there if he hadn't felt it on her when he was helping move her from the litter to the platform. The hair on her head was coarser, a color like that of unstained wood; it was cut close to her head, fitting like a brown cap.

She took a step and he tensed. It was like a tree trying to walk. He didn't say anything, just continued to watch her, amazed at her balance; it seemed to him that she teetered on the edge of a bruising fall over and over again. His own plump, malleable body with its low center of gravity and four legs to hold it off the floor seemed so much more logical and stable.

She crossed to the sleeping room's barred window and stood there a while, staring out at the walled garden with its fountain and grass and a tall narrow naqon tree and two round beds of flowers. This was where the city mothers housed those who came from the Island to talk trade with them. Though she showed no sign that she recognized anything she saw, the healers told him she'd been here before.

She came back and sat on the platform. There was a light film of moisture over her face and her hands were trembling with weariness, but her eyes were hard as jewels and there were edges to her gaze.

He took a handkerchief from his sleeve, dabbed beneath the dark lenses at the matter gathering in the corners of his eyes. "What do you remember, Kara Stavokal?"

"Nothing. Confusion. Pain. Salt water slapping at my face, salt burning in my eyes, in my mouth. Holding onto something that tore at my

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hands..." She looked at them, rubbed her thumbs across her fingertips. "How long have I been here?"

"Four days," he said. "The healers kept you sleeping until they knew your injuries were not life-threatening."

"What happened?"

"The island we gave you was volcanic in its nature and returned without warning to its origins. Its fate crossed with the fate of a storm that also turned without warning. These things happen as God wills them."

Her mouth compressed into a thin line and the bones of her face grew more prominent. If he could have felt her anger, it would have been fierce as the storm that blew her here. He sucked himself in to make a smaller target and his hands moved toward his eyes before he could stop them, the spectacles falling to the tiles once again.

He heard her sigh, heard the sounds she made as she shifted position on the platform. "Don't shrink," she said, "it wasn't your doing. You know my name. Will you tell me yours?"

He kept his palms pressed against his face, but he answered her as calmly as he could. "I am Tsoylan, a puman of the Talqoya. I am your guide."

"Guide or guard?"

"Perhaps both."

"Hm. I'll leave that for now. What about the others in the compound?"

"Wingah Island spat you forth. It swallowed the others."

"All dead?"

"So I was told."

He heard a faint gasp, but when she spoke, her voice was crisp and detached. "I appreciate what you and your healers have done, but I need to talk to my own people, to let them know that I'm alive. This city was given a Com system by the Company that sent me here. If you could arrange for me to visit that Com, I would be most grateful."

Tsoylan forced his hands down from his eyes and blinked at her through thickening tears. "That is not possible, Kara Stavokal."

"Then bring someone here who can take me."

"You don't understand. You desecrated the Qawanya, the Holy Ground where the mothers lay their bones."

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"Desecrated seems harsh for being stormtossed somewhere."

He shivered. "Intent is irrelevant, it is the act that matters. The pumans who carried you from there have already surrendered their lives to God. She requires yours also." He straightened, intoned, "So says the Great Mother." Then he collapsed in a shaking mass on the floor until the Fear evoked by the Name passed out of him.

When his knees would work again and he pushed himself up, he saw a pale hand holding out his spectacles. Taking them with gratitude, he eased them into place over his eyes, tugged out the handkerchief, wiped away the exudate from the ducts, then settled himself more comfortably in the cradle of his legs.

"Explain what you meant by guide," she said.

"I am to lead you to accept your fate," he said. "It is our custom that the dying guide the dying to a gentle death."

"Then you...."

"I am redundant," he said. "It is my duty to step aside and allow another to stand in my tracks."

"When? If it doesn't trouble you to talk about it."

"When Muya returns to the House of Homitis." He watched her intently to see if she understood.

"Homitis," she said after a moment. "That's the small digger which looks like a miniature Talq?"

"Yes. Our Past Readers have put together a theory that says when God created the Talqoya, She took Flesh that already was and gave it Soul."

"And Homitis is also one of the band of constellations that make your Year Cycle. Your moon Muya passes through them."

"That is so."

She looked past him, her will turned inward for the moment. Her pink-brown mouth moved slightly and he thought, she's naming the signs. She knew Talq-speak well, even had the correct variant for addressing a puman. She knew more than he expected, but knew-not much that was common understanding. It would be another thing to talk about while they waited for her angers and her grief to pass off.

"Six months," she said. "Redundant. What is that?"

"My komat was drawn in this year's Terminal lottery. Do you understand what the pumans are?"

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He waited with the patience he'd learned over the years while she considered her answer and he knew it when she decided on candor. This pleased him because it meant there was enough personhood between them to let him truly be her guide.

"Those who do not — or cannot — breed," she said.

"Cannot is the correct interpretation, Kara Stavokal. Fate speaks through the Creche lottery and puts the mark of puman on all but a few of the children there. Those with the mark eat different food, live different lives and the capacity to recreate ourselves withers within us. I do not wish to talk further about this. It will evoke images that are distressing to me."

"Then we'll talk about Pikaya Tsewa. Tell me about your city."

Laughter bubbled in him, surprising him. Even in such a short time and over such a gap of strangeness, he was coming to like her. "You can't escape, Kara Stavokal. And you won't be permitted to reach the Com."

"Tell me anyway. Talk to me about the things that please you. I need to understand you. That is my nature."

He was not deceived by her graceful acquiescence. She was determined to avoid her fate and did not yet understand the futility of her desire. He unlocked his knees and lowered his belly to the floor and closed his eyes. "There is a subtle beauty about the tunnels of Pikaya Tsewa...."

2. The struggle

WHEN HE WOKE the next morning, Kara Stavokal was gone. He sighed and went into the washing place, used the water brush to scour away the exuviae from his skin, pulling the folds taut and scrubbing the accumulations from the cracks and crannies of his being. Between death vigils he let himself go, sleeping too much and never bathing; it was a way of being angry, the only way he could afford.

During each vigil the Wardens of the Dead provided his clothing. He dressed carefully, making sure every fold was in place. The worn uniform had been washed so many times it was nearly as soft as the fur on his pivan, the pet which he had to give away when his komat was drawn. His belly sagged and his hands stilled as he remembered the feel of Enang's gentle

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quivering against his palms when he lay on the resting frame and listened to the musicbox, relaxing after a long day at the creche.

He was in the kitchen, taking a tray of kwibread smallcakes from the oven when the Wardens brought Kara Stavokal back. He heard her scream with rage and curse in her angular homespeak, heard the boom that told him she must have kicked the slide that covered the door. He tumbled the small cakes from their shallow holes and was pleased because he'd got them the exact golden brown that brought the most flavor from the coarsely ground meal. He cut them open and left pats of kapir butter to melt on the halves while he sliced up fat tasty wakasha mushrooms to fry in more of the butter.

While the mushrooms were draining on the fiber pad, he took a pitcher of cold soshil juice into the parlor, set it on the table where he'd put a chair and a resting frame, went back into the kitchen and brought out the two plates.

She still hadn't appeared, but the long window was open. He sighed, pushed his spectacles closer to his eyes and went out.

Two gwussies were diving at the naqon tree, their flight skins closed when they darted downward, popping out to catch the air and pull them up again before they crashed into the tangle of branches. The larger one, the mother, screamed at Tsoylan as he edged closer. She stooped and struck with her talons, missing because he let his knees collapse and she sailed past where he had been. He crawled hastily away and she returned to her attacks on the tree.

He collected a handful of small stones from the nearest flower bed, retreated to the window. "Kara Stavokal, even if you could get over the wall, there's no place to go. You might as well come inside and eat your breakfast. Let the gwussies rest."

There was silence for a moment, then the tree rustled, the woman dropped to the grass and ran for the window as he threw the stones to keep the gwussies off. She stalked past him without a word.

He followed her in and found her standing beside the table pouring soshil juice into her glass. He too said nothing, established himself in the resting frame and began eating the food he'd cooked.

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As the days passed, she kept turning and twisting, trying every way she could think of to run from her fate. When none of these came to anything, she went from rage to weeping spells with huge, shuddery sobs tearing through her body and back to rage again. Both were reactions to being helpless, caught in a trap from which there was no escape. He understood that and hovered round the edges of the house, letting her have her anger and her grief — and her silences.

"You are not my first death," he sang to himself in whispers so she wouldn't hear.

"Nor the first whose rushing breath
Becomes a shout,
I won't. I will not go...."

She retreated into her sleeping room, locked the door and wouldn't come out even to eat. He worried about her, but left her alone though his keypac would open all locks in this house. At this stage, it was better for her to work things out herself. If she could.

On the third day she emerged and came in the kitchen to find him. She was thin and drawn, but quieter. "Thank you, Tsoylan," she said. "What are you making this morning? I hope it's as good as it was the last time. I'm rather hungry."

3. Talking

KARA STAVOKAL sat on the low sill of the open window, her head against the glass. The air from outside was cool and pleasant as the sun sank near the horizon. Shadows gathered like cobwebs inside the room. Tsoylan sat in the deepest of them, untroubled enough to take his dark spectacles off; they were on the floor beside him. His head was sunk into the hollows of his arm shoulders and his belly was comfortable on the tiles.

She turned her head to look at him. "How old are you?"

He scratched at the whiskers on his chin and wondered why she wanted to know. "I have thirty-seven years."

"Hm. How long do Talqoya usually live?"

"You mean am I going sooner than I ought? What is there to say?

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Pumans die when their komats are drawn, some sooner, some later."

She was silent a while, her face drawn together in way he'd learned meant concentration rather than anger. He shrank himself smaller, anxiety surging through him because he thought she was going to ask things that would wake the Fear.

"If I were a puman, how old would you think me?"

His body fluids flowed back to his perimeters and his muscles softened with relief. After a moment's intense thought, he said, "Were I to assess energy levels, ease of movement, general assurance and ignore those physical elements that I cannot assess because I do not know your kind, I would see you as a high function puman of experience, a builder perhaps, or a breeder of luminaria. And you will have been doing your work long enough to have acquired the habit of authority, yet not long enough to have surrendered to the Lot. Considering all this, if you were puman I would say you had perhaps forty years."

She laughed then, a sound that rang happily in his ears and made his body expand yet more. "I like your way with words," she said. "Were you a poet or a maker of tales?"

"I was a teacher, Kara Stavokal. In a creche. An eminently replaceable object."

"Hm. I have difficulty thinking of you as replaceable, Tsoylan, but I see this drift bothers you, so I'll leave it. Your estimate amuses me, I'll tell you why in a moment. My people have a way of postponing age as you would an appointment with someone you don't want to meet, but in the end, of course, that annoying stranger is still there waiting for you. I wish I could say all that time made dying easier, but it doesn't. The longer our lives are, the more greedily we cling to them. I've had about three hundred years, Tsoylan. Ten years ago, I received my last treatment and knew that every day that passed was one gone from the total left to me. Now you Talqoya are going to steal the rest of them." She clicked her tongue. "Nu, that was mean-spirited of me. Forget I said it if you will. The reason I was amused — my first treatment stabilized me at thirty. Add ten to that and you see how close you came."

"And what is it you've done all those many years?"

She brushed brown hair off a face softened by memory. When she spoke, her voice was barely louder than a whisper. He had to strain to hear

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her. "I was learning. You were a teacher, I'm a learner." It was several moments before she spoke again. "I remember a world called Haddálice. It was my first time in the field. I was a busy little..." she hesitated, searching for a Talq equivalent, "...a busy pivan gathering tidbits for my team leader. It was his last chance with the Company. He'd made too many mistakes, ruined the insert before this and cost them a market. And I could see him making more, but he was arrogant in his desperation and wouldn't listen to me. It got him killed. Hm. Odd how my working life is bracketed by death. I hadn't thought of that till now. The Haddálicci are...you don't have the word; they are born in water but leave it for the land. They create tapestries like dreams drawn from the mists in which they spend their lives and they make songs that are almost as intricate. They are a jealous folk and quick to take offense." She turned her head to smile at him. "With the Haddálicci too a man's intent has no weight because they believe no man can know another's heart and men do lie. My team leader gave offense again and again until he exhausted their patience. And one morning we found him face down in a muddy pool of water, drowned very dead."

"How many worlds have you seen, Kara Stavokal?"

"Fifty, sixty, something like that. I lost count after a while."

It was dark outside now. He could smell the pollen off the grass beyond the walls and the sticky, sweet perfume of the naqon tree as it opened out its nightpods. It was time to think of supper, but he didn't feel like moving. "I've never been anywhere but Pikaya Tsewa."

"Do you regret that?"

"I don't think so. I want life to be predictable. It's difficult for me to understand how you can relish such chaos and find pleasure in not knowing where to put your feet. I wonder if it's because you take such chances simply moving."

She laughed again and again he shivered with pleasure. "Four foot talking to two foot?"

"It could be so. You continually astonish me with your agility."

"Hm." She got to her feet, stepped over the sill and stood in the garden gazing up at the stars. "My children are out there somewhere looking at another sky. I wonder what they're thinking."

Tsoylan covered his smile with a hand though she couldn't see him

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from where she stood. She was strange and sometimes frightening, but at the same time so very much like the pumans he'd guided before he came to her. There was the same anger and grief and they too worked at him, hunting for the keys to his sympathy, his help, wanting him to make it not so. She was pushing a little too hard, but he thought it was because being separated from her people had left her off-balance. "Your children?" he said.

"Two girls and a boy. Nu, that was a long time ago." She returned to the window, stood leaning against the hinge side, still watching the stars with a hunger he could almost feel. "It is one of the better consequences of extended life that your children can become your friends. I miss them." She sighed and turned her back on the stars. "I haven't been here long enough to learn this, do you have rites to give dismissal to your dead?"

"The mothers do, I can't talk about those, the pumans and the fathers, no. There are the guides, but that's a private thing."

"Would it be forbidden?"

"I don't know. The dead are taken away and we don't talk about them after that." He found that he was troubled by this when he said it to her, though he'd never thought about it when it simply happened, even when he knew it would happen to him. He brushed his unease away and concentrated on her. This was part of her new attack, he was sure of that, but more subtle than her opening move. What was she aiming at?

"We have a Passvic when somebody dies," she said. "It's a celebration of the dead person. A remembrance. People who knew him come, his children come, his kin and connections. They sit together all night telling stories about him, what he was like, some of the things they did together, the happy times and sad times they shared with him. There's food and drink and music, though each Passvic is a little different because people are different."

"Why are you telling me this?"

She ran her fingers through her hair. Muya's light touched a single white strand and made it glow until she moved her head again. "Vengeance," she said, her voice quiet and a little sad. "I was thinking of lying to you, Tsoylan. I changed my mind. I don't like feeling dirty."

"Vengeance? I don't understand."

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"The word or what I mean by it?"

"The word I know. Why did you use it?"

"You like the idea of the Passvic, don't you? Never mind answering. I see the anger that hides behind your calm eyes. You'd like to be recognized and remembered when your life ends, but I think such a rite would be forbidden if the mothers learned of it. It is the quietness of the end and the silence that comes afterward that lets the Terminal Lot keep happening. You vanish and your place closes over like a healing wound — and at the same time the other pumans are reminded subtly, silently, that they too are replaceable. Your word. Your truth. The idea of the Passvic would fall like a tiny drop into a still, deep pool. But even a drop makes ripples and the ripples spread. Time passes. Quite likely a lot of time. And one day the pumans refuse to be replaceable." She crossed the room and knelt beside him, touched one of his hands. "May I?" At his nod, she lifted it, bent her head over it. "Vengeance," she breathed against his palm, then straightened up and folded his fingers over the warm spot. "I give it to you. Do with it what you want."

4. Acceptance

WHEN HE was sure the time had come, when she seemed quiet and resigned, he fixed a last breakfast for her, though she didn't know it was the last — nothing special, but one she'd liked when he made it for her before. Kwibread smallcakes oozing with kapir butter, wakasha mushrooms and a cold pitcher of soshil juice. He brought in the plate of fried wakasha slices and as he leaned across her arm to set it down, he slipped the needle knife into the place at the back of her skull. The healers told him she'd be dead before she knew it, if he got it right. And he did.

He lifted her from the table and took her into the garden, laid her out on the grass, her face in the sunlight. While the gwussies circled overhead, screaming at him, he washed her body, dressed her in a clean white shift, folded her hands above her ribs. When he was done, he fetched a glass of soshil juice and crouched in the shade of the naqon tree. "I accept your poisoned gift, Kara Stavokal. Let this be the first Passvic in Pikaya Tsewa."

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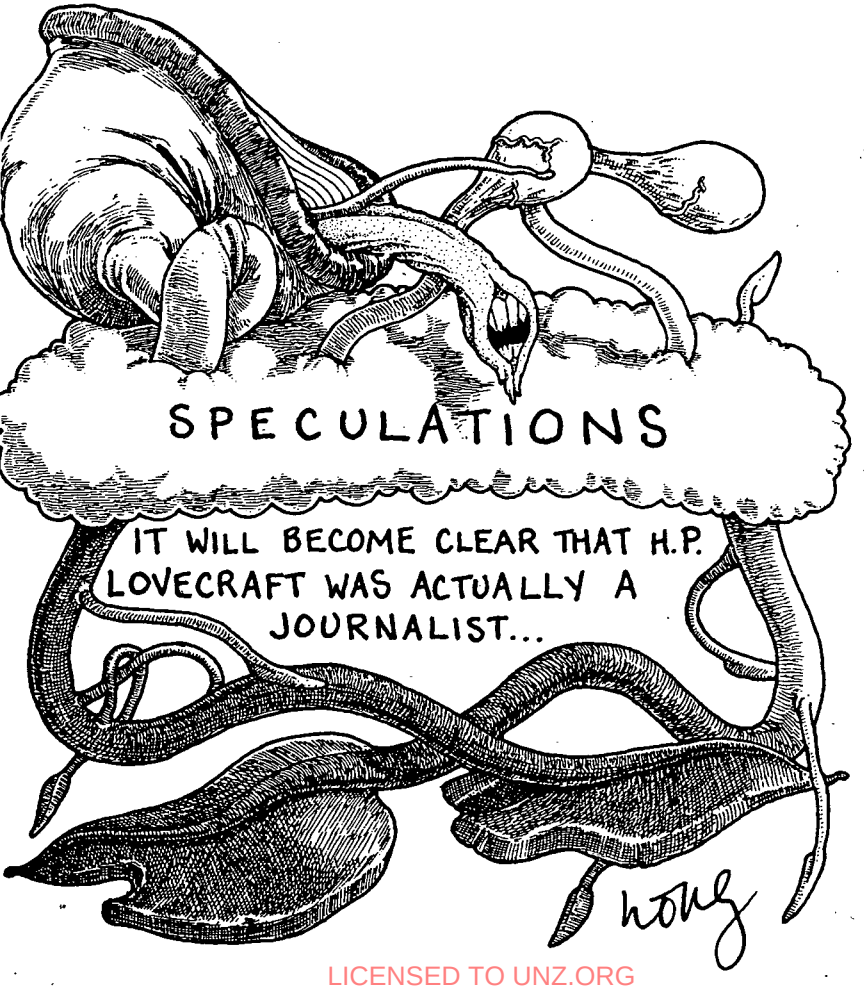
He drank from the glass. In the beginning the soshil was bitter on his tongue, but it soon grew sweeter.

"You are not my last death," he sang.
"Nor the last whose rushing breath
Becomes a shout,
I won't. I will not go...." ☙



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With the school year about to begin again, here now is a story about a British public school and one exceptional student. Ben Jeapes is himself a graduate of such a school ("public" schools in England are roughly the equivalent of private schools in the U.S.) and reports that he had trouble taking the establishment seriously when he discovered that the chorus of the school song celebrates King Edward VI (now deceased roughly four and a half centuries). Here in the Twentieth Century, Ben Jeapes edits scientific journals in Oxford and has published stories in Interzone, Aboriginal Science Fiction, *and various anthologies.*

Pages Out of Order

By Ben Jeapes

THIRD FORM, WINTER TERM, 1978

TOM'S ARRIVAL IN MY LIFE was preceded by the sound of his mother.

It was a sunny September weekend and most of our year had already arrived at our new school; we had shaken off our parents and were unpacking our trunks in the dormitory, casting covert glances at our neighbors or making shy conversation.

Once, a summer ago, we had known who we were. Good little public schoolboys, the future administrators of a dead empire; diehard Conservatives, sworn enemies of Callaghan's Labour government. Two months beforehand we were kings at prep school and the pinnacle of maturity was the grand age of thirteen. Now we were little boys again, dwarfed even by the mountainous fourteen-year-olds in the year above us. We were longing for an object on which to vent our new-found insecurity, and then the Meltons arrived.

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We heard Mrs. Melton coming down the corridor and suspended our unpacking to listen better: "Is this the way? Doesn't anyone know anything? You, are you a prefect? Can you direct us to Thomas's dormitory?"

She was a brassy woman in a fur coat, who glided in like visiting royalty while two conscripted fifth-formers struggled behind her with a trunk. Absorbed in this spectacle, it took an effort to notice the small, red-haired figure in his mother's wake: misery incarnate, in a too-big suit.

"Now, where's your bed?" Mrs. Melton stalked about the dormitory, squinting at the nameplates above each bed, and homed in on the bed next to mine. "Here it is. Put the trunk there, will you?"

She turned to her son.

"Well, dear, I'll be off so you can settle in. Be good." She gave his cheek a quick peck and looked around. Her eyes settled on me. "This is your neighbor — " [she peered at my nameplate] " — William Sutton. William, this is Thomas. Remember everything I told you, Thomas. Ask a prefect if you need anything and if anyone offers you a cigarette go straight to the housemaster." That line sealed her son's fate. "Are you coming to see me off?"

We all realized, the two fifth-formers included, that we were staring at Tom, who followed after his mother with his face a flaming red that matched his hair. The fifth-formers tactfully vanished and left us sharpening our claws with glee for Tom's return.

9:30 pm, Day One of term. Bed time for little boys. The ribbing had eased off and we were still sorting out who would be the leaders of the year, who the followers of the leaders, and who would be more or less independent. This last group had two sub-categories — acceptable and unacceptable. I knew from experience that my big ears would exclude me from the first group unless I showed a lot more bravado than I had in me; the best course was to lie low and hope no one noticed me. I therefore found myself in the second group, kidding myself that this was in fact acceptable independence. Tom, because no one else would dare take him, found himself squarely in the third, independence quite unacceptable.

I didn't have the heart for the prolonged persecution campaign that the far end of the dormitory had set themselves on [several voices had

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already broken up that end, which gave them a head start in the maturity stakes). Preventative alliances were forming in the squeaky-voiced camp and I decided to do my bit. Tom was curled up in his bed, nose buried in a book.

"Hi," I said. No answer. "Thomas?"

("*Tha-maas*!" came a cry from the far end, in the tone used by the woman in *Tom and Jerry* when the cat has just wrecked the house again.)

He glared back at me.

"Tom," he said, and turned back to his book.

"Oh, sorry." Tom, eh? I had always been William, even to my friends. Time to grow up. "I'm Will," I said.

"Oh."

I resented this treatment: maybe no one else had seen the teddy bear he had almost taken out of his trunk, but I had and I hadn't said a word.

"Good book?" I asked. He held it up — *The Spy Who Loved Me*. "Oh, right! Is it as good as the film?" The latest epic to feature Ol' Eyebrows had come out the previous year.

("Want a cigarette?" someone called. "If anyone offers you a cigarette, go *straight* to the housemaster," someone else answered, falsetto.)

"It's far better," he said loftily. "It's a proper love story. It doesn't have any submarines or undersea bases."

"Not even a Lotus?" I asked hopefully.

"'Fraid not."

("Hey, Melton! You queer?" "That's it! He's bent!" "Move your bed away from him, Sutton!")

"Is there any...you know?" I said, even more hopefully.

"There is a bit, actually," he admitted, with a bashful grin. He showed me a couple of choice passages, of which between us we understood about half, and we chatted a bit more about James Bond. By the time the prefect came in to turn the lights out at 10 o'clock we were 0.1 of the way toward being friends.

Winter, 1978. Another generation of schoolboys navigated its way by instinct through the tricky passages of adolescence; selfish, arrogant prigs without a care in the world beyond proving our maturity. A boy's worth was judged by his prowess in sport and his body's testosterone count. You

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sank or swam, which meant you grew up fast. There was no point in running to Mummy because Mummy wasn't there and Matron, lovely lady that she was, wasn't quite the same. Outside our artificial, unreal environment the country suffered the Winter of Discontent. Margaret Thatcher would be the nation's salvation. James Callaghan was a Communist (no one was too sure what a socialist was). Liberals were all bent.

Tom Melton could do nothing right. He was small and his fair skin made him look even younger than he was. His voice refused to break, lodging itself in the higher registers (he left the choir to get away from this stigma, in vain). He had an accent so refined that even we noticed. He liked reading books and he played a musical instrument (the clarinet, and well — he was a Music Scholar). He was a sensitive, emotional boy and he was targeted for destruction.

We were placed in the same form, where his unpopularity and my cultivated nebbishness drew us together and we moved from shy liking to proper friendship. Since anyone who failed to come up to scratch was tagged as bent or queer ("gay" hadn't entered our lexicon yet), we both acquired the label. I did sometimes wonder, in the way that adolescents do, but since the sight of Tom in the shower did nothing for me I decided the others were wrong.

Half term came and went, and Tom refused to talk about it. I imagined a week alone with Mrs. Melton and sympathized. I had learnt, to my fascination, that his parents were divorced and his mother had custody of him, though Daddy paid the bills. His father, an unspecified businessman, had left for *another woman*. I still hadn't got used to the idea that adults (especially parents) had sex even when they didn't want children.

The second half of term was much like the first, and then the threat of the holidays loomed. After his reaction to half term, I could guess how he felt about four whole weeks at home.

"Come and stay with us," I invited, after consulting with my parents up in Hereford. His face split into the biggest grin I had seen.

"Can I? How long?"

"As long as you like, really."

Mrs. Melton didn't give in without a fight but we got Tom for the week before Christmas, at the cost of my spending a week with the Meltons in the new year.

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THIRD FORM, SPRING TERM, 1979

ONE TERM down, fourteen to go. I pitied Tom, torn between an unhappy home and a school he loathed. I had mentioned his unpopularity to my father, who shrugged. He had been through the system himself thirty years previously.

"He'll have to learn to cope," he had said with rough sympathy. "And you can stand up for your friend, can't you, son?"

Well...

"Of course," I said quickly. Dad shrugged.

"So there you are. Perhaps things will get better when his voice breaks."

This happy day was still a way off when things changed.

The true bane of Tom's life was a boy called Stephen Gale. Perhaps because he never quite made it at anything: he wasn't quite good enough for the team, he wasn't quite accepted as a leader of our year. Older boys smirked slightly when they spoke to him. The main reason for his general unpleasance I didn't learn until later, but all these little things piled up and made him an obnoxious bully.

Hockey was the sport for the Spring term, and whenever Gale found himself near Tom on the field his stick always managed to catch itself around Tom's ankle and send him flying. On this day he was spotted by the umpire and given a ticking off in public, which only made him worse.

We got back from games and showered. Gale turned Tom's hot tap off when Tom wasn't looking and tripped him up when he tried to leave. I came out of the showers a few minutes later to find Tom sitting by his locker with his towel still round his waist. His face was buried in his hands and his shoulders were shaking.

"Tom?" I said. He jerked his head up and the vicious hatred in his look make me take a step back.

"Fuck off!" he hissed.

"Hey, Tom, it's me," I said. I noticed the tears in his eyes and heard the rattle in his throat. He was trying very, very hard not to cry.

"This isn't like you, Tom," I said.

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"I don't give a fuck." Two fucks in ten seconds was definitely not like Tom. He hugged his knees and his voice still shook.

"I've had enough. I hate this place, I hate this life, I..." He broke off with a choke. "I'm going to flip, Will. I really am. I am going to flip."

I toweled myself dry quietly, got dressed and went to lounge in the third form dayroom, waiting for afternoon lessons to start.

Tom came in shortly after me. He seemed to have got himself under control.

"It's the queer boy!"

Tom ignored Gale. He went to his locker, took out a book, sat down and started reading. His ears were burning despite the show he put on.

"Hey, did you hear? Melton thought he had a pubic hair, until he peed through it."

Cue general hilarity and mirth. Tom's ears burnt brighter and he studied the book even more fixedly. To my surprise, I found myself flushing and I buried my nose further in the work I was doing. There was going to be a fight and that wanker Gale was going to bully my friend again. Oh shit oh shit oh shit.

Shut up, Gale, just shut up! Not Oscar Wilde, but it would serve. It probably would shut him up, too, if only out of surprise. And I would be his next target. No thanks.

"Is it a nice book, Tommy? Ooh, I do hope Mummy would approve." Gale grabbed the book and held it up above him.

"Give it back, please," Tom groaned. Gale danced away with the book held up in the air. Tom jumped up, shouting, "Don't — "

He froze. I could see his face: his expression went blank for a moment and he staggered forward into Gale.

"Get off me, queer boy!" Gale shouted, knocking Tom away. Tom fell over backward and landed in a sprawl. He shook his head and slowly climbed to his feet again.

"You all right, Melton?" one of the braver boys asked. Gale glared at him.

Tom smiled: it was the creepiest thing I had ever seen because there was a most un-Tomlike glint in his eye.

"Ah, yes, Gale. The original cock-sucker."

Gale stood stunned and his cheeks reddened at the burst of laughter.

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This had to be revenged. He stood over Tom, using his height to dominate.

"Listen, queer boy — "

"Oh do be quiet, Stevie-poos," Tom pouted and minced at him. "You'll make Evans jealous."

Evans? Evans was the captain of the Firsts and surely as straight as they come. Couldn't Tom have picked a better target?

But Gale was gaping, mouth open. Then he recovered and stepped forward, dangerously close to Tom and looming over him.

"One last chance, Melton — "

"One last chance, Melton," Tom mimicked perfectly. "Go squeeze your zits, Gale."

Gale's hand shot out —

Tom's grabbed it and pulled Gale into a tight embrace. Gale bellowed and writhed to escape, but somehow Tom was hanging on to him and seemed to be whispering in his ear. Gale stopped writhing and stared down at Tom in horror. Tom released him and Gale, white faced, took a step back.

"I...you...wouldn't!" he gasped.

"Want a bet?" Tom said evenly. Gale fled.

The rest of us were a frozen tableau, still awed by the extraordinary exchange. Tom seemed to have forgotten about us; he stood still, looking at his hands, then down at the rest of his body. Then he, too, left.

I found him in the washroom. He was standing motionless, looking in the mirror. Not squeezing blackheads or zits, just looking. Sometimes he would move his head from side to side, never taking his eyes of his reflection. Then he saw my reflection behind him and turned round, grinning.

"Will. Hi," he said, and put his hands on my shoulders. I was terrified he was going to pull me into an embrace too, but he just stood and took me in as though he had never seen me before.

"What was all that about, Tom?" I said.

"Hmm? Oh, Gale, yes. I just mentioned a couple of names, that's all. I shouldn't have made fun of him." He smiled and actually put an arm round my shoulders, for all the world like a big brother. "He won't bully anyone again, that's what counts. I've done him a favor, really, 'cos now he's going to have to learn to make friends."

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That was all it took. Tom didn't want universal popularity, just to be left alone, and it worked. He could live his life his way and when it suited him he could be on good terms with anyone. He was not a violent boy and he despised bullies. He remained independent of cliques, but now it was the acceptable form of independence. He was open to everyone; he could mix with anyone if he so chose, and if he wanted to he could have been a leader of the year in his own right.

One of the boys he could have led was Stephen Gale, who now practically worshipped his footsteps. Funny old world.

With the Easter holidays on the horizon, I thought we should make arrangements for visiting again.

"We're going to Scotland for the week before Easter," I said, "but we could squeeze you in any other time."

"Ah...yes," Tom said. "Will, would you mind if I didn't come at all? I mean, do come and stay with us, I'd really like that, but I want to be with my mother."

"*What*?"

He smiled and shrugged sheepishly.

"She's lonely, Will. Dad's treated her like shit and she deserves a bit more than she's getting from her only child."

"Then why did she send you here?" I demanded.

"Because, my dear, one does," he said in his best Noel Coward. In his own voice, he went on, "It would never occur to her not to. Her family have been going to public school since 1066 and the stiff upper lip's been genetically inbred. I'm going to change all that."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Look, give me your diary."

I handed it over and he riffled through April.

"When do you get back from Scotland? The sixteenth? Fine. Not a lot of holiday left after that, but...say, come on the seventeenth, and see for yourself."

Both Meltons were waiting for me at the station and Mrs. Melton swooped on me.

"William! How nice to see you again." She kissed me. She kissed me!

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I could see Tom grinning over her shoulder. She was smiling and animated and as she drove us back to the house, a vast palace in the gin-and-Jaguar heartland of deepest Surrey, she chatted about all the lovely things she and Tom had been doing over the holidays. When she left us in my room it was a relief. Tom was still grinning. He sat in a chair and let me unpack.

"You've drugged her food, haven't you?"

"I've been nice to her, that's all."

"'We've done so many *lovely* things, Thomas and I — "

"Fancy coming up to London this evening?" he said, changing the subject.

"Sure." I had discovered in January that the local nightlife — at least for two boys of fourteen who weren't really sure what a good time was anyway — left a lot to be desired.

"There's a girl I've been seeing, and she's got a sister — "

"Yeah, yeah." I stopped unpacking and looked at him. He was serious.

"Don't tell me, it's your baby cousins, right?"

"Will! No, Maria's sixteen, and Alice is fourteen, same as you."

I must have gone pale. The thought of girls — real girls — was terrifying. Tom hooted with laughter.

"You're scared!" He ran over to the window and shouted out of it, "He's scared — "

"Tom!"

"Ah, relax." He turned back to me. "You'll hang on to your virginity for a few more years."

"*Tom!*"

"Will, they're a really nice couple of girls. We'll go up after tea, right?"

My toes still curl at the memory of my fears. It was a totally innocent evening. Maria and Alice were the daughters of a friend of Tom's father; they were good looking, intelligent and thoroughly pleasant to be with. We met up in Leicester Square, went to see *Superman* and afterward went to their home in Kensington for dinner. Just the four of us, and when their parents came home we had a couple more drinks and the party broke up.

It was still the first time I'd talked to a girl other than my sister — yuk! — or one of her friends — *yuk*! — for years; certainly the first time since girls had become something more to me than inferior imitations of boys,

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flat all the way down, to be avoided and despised. Alice and I circled each other like a couple of teenagers on a first date, which is exactly what we were, but we got on well enough and enjoyed each other's company. Just before setting off to catch the tube we managed a quick, shy kiss, and it was like heaven.

I had been much too absorbed in Alice to think of how Tom was getting on with the sixteen-year-old Maria, much less wonder about how he had managed to bridge the age difference so effectively. There is a lot more than two years between a sixteen-year-old girl and a fourteen-year-old boy. On the train back, it occurred to me to comment in as tangential a manner as possible.

Tom grinned and gave his one comment on the subject.

"It's company I'm after, not sex, Will," he said, "and that's just a question of knowing the right words."

Fourth form, Winter term, 1979

TOM AND I finished our first year as the closest and best of friends and made arrangements to keep in touch over the summer holidays. When we returned for the fourth form we had progressed from the dayroom to shared studies. We got to choose roommates and inevitably we shared together.

This was more like it! A year older, several inches taller and much, much wiser than the previous Autumn, and (best of all) one step up the maturity ladder from the new third form. We had passed through the worst traumas and adjustments that adolescence could throw at us and we weren't so worried about flaunting our heterosexuality at all and sundry, but again I began to wonder about myself. Had Alice (who I hadn't seen since) been just a flash in the pan? I was the only really close friend that Tom had; he seemed to make a deliberate effort to seek out my friendship, which I found flattering, but...I put it down to the fact that I had been his friend even before his *volte-face* the previous year.

But even so...

I plucked up my courage one evening to tell him my fears, in the privacy of our study with no one else about, and he laughed.

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"You're not gay, Will," he said. He was the first person I knew to use that word, and he said it with such conviction that I was paradoxically hurt.

"How do you know?" I demanded, and bit my tongue when I realized how I sounded.

"You're not," he repeated. He turned back to his work, then looked up again. "Gale is."

"Gale?"

"Sure. What made him such a dork was that he was terrified of anyone finding out and so he had to act like he thought a strapping hetero should. He'll come...I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if he came out at university. In fact..." He looked about, as though afraid of eavesdroppers, though no one else could be in the same room. "...in fact, and if you repeat this to anyone else you die, you remember Evans?"

"Yeah." Our school's rugby hero had left at the end of the last year for Cambridge.

"I happen to know that he and Gale...well, did it, as t'were, last year. Or rather, Gale had it done to him, and found he liked it. And he has, so to speak, done it with a couple of other boys too. And I'm not just talking adolescents tossing each other off, I'm talking the whole hog."

"No!" I was shocked, horrified, *fascinated*, and I wanted to know everything. It didn't occur to me to doubt him. "How do you know?"

"Because he...has told me. And, no Will, I'm not telling you who the others are. You'd refuse to go in the showers with them if you knew."

There was a look in his eye — a cold look, as if he was challenging me to disbelieve him, and I didn't dare.

"You sound as if you don't mind," I said.

"Mind?" He seemed to muse on it. "I suppose I mind sixth formers buggering third formers, but on the other hand, why fight what's inevitable?"

"I can't believe it!"

"It's understandable," he said. "These are the most potent years of our life, Will, did you know that? You and I should be out there spreading our seed about and instead we're *here* with nowhere to spread it except each other."

This conjured up an image so revolting that it wasn't difficult to push it away. Without looking up from his work, Tom carried on: "And we're

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cooped up here with nothing but other boys for company, if we're seen talking to a girl it's regarded as subversive and unnatural, and they're surprised when places like this get a reputation as hotbeds of buttocks and buggery. You wait 'til I'm dictator, Will. The public school system will burn. It serves no useful purpose and gives its victims grief for the rest of their lives."

"So — " I said, but there was no stopping him now.

"Anyone who has ever sent an adolescent to a single sex boarding school will be forcibly confined in a room with members of whichever gender they would least like to shag, and pumped full of hormones until they feel they'll burst if they don't have it off with someone. Let them see how they like it."

"I don't understand you, Tom."

He looked up at me and gave that grin again. His usual confidence.

"You will."

Fifth form, Spring term, 1981

IN THE fifth form, I got expelled.

Toward the middle of the year, with "O" level exams looming, the school was hit by a drinking spree. Getting paralytic was the trendy thing to do.

When, for three weekends running, boys had been hospitalized for alcohol poisoning, the headmaster made a speech to the whole school. Just possessing the stuff was to be an expulsion offense. That was all.

Two boys from our year were expelled a fortnight later, for just that crime. Tom, in public, was as shocked as the rest of us. Privately, he was disdainful.

"Boys will be boys," he said. I was angry.

"Doesn't it bother you?" I demanded. "Just for a little drink — "

"If they didn't want to go," he said, "all they had to do was not get drunk. And as for getting into intensive care, nearly getting yourself killed, using up a good hospital bed which someone deserving might need..." Then he grabbed my shoulders and looked me straight in the eyes.

"Will, promise me now, you'll never, ever be so stupid, right?"

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"Well, I... I mean..." I stammered.

"Promise!"

"Sure, I promise."

And it was a safe promise. I'd never been drunk in my life and I wasn't a rebel. I didn't go out of my way to break the rules.

Then I had more important things on my mind, like "O" levels. I'd first heard of these mystical institutions when I was eight, which meant I had been dreading them for half my life. The crucial bits of paper that would affect the rest of my time on this world. Never mind your degree or your "A" levels or even just practical experience — without a good crop of "O"s, no prospective employer will even look at you. When you've had that hammered into you for half of your existence, getting through them is worth celebrating.

Which a group of us did, with a couple of bottles of whisky. Don't ask me where it came from. I just remember being flattered by the invitation to join a group of the lads who had got the magical fluid from somewhere. We retired behind the bushes in the park and drank it.

Choose your friends. I passed out first and they left me there.

I was woken up by Tom, shaking me.

"Will! Will, for fuck's sake, *Will!*" He slapped me, hard, and it didn't hurt a bit. He was muttering to himself, something like:

"Too late, Melton, too fucking late — "

The fact that this was the first time in ages that I had seen Tom worked up about anything, or even swearing, failed to register. I looked blearily up at both of him and burst out laughing.

"I'm pissed!" I squealed, and fell onto my back, quivering with mirth. It was the funniest thing ever.

"Will, you berk," he said more softly, and pulled me to my feet. He supported me back to the house.

"Wha'going?" I demanded.

"Back to the study for some coffee. The housemaster's on the prowl and he's not going to find you. He's *not.*"

"The housemaster!" I called. "Hello, Bugsy! I've...hee, hee, hee, I've had a *whole bottle*..." I collapsed laughing again, dragging Tom down.

He got me to the study with the help of a passing third former. The kettle had just boiled.

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"Drink," he ordered, thrusting a cup of coffee into my hands. I sipped it reluctantly.

"Tastes soapy," I objected.

"That's because you're pissed. Finish it."

I shrugged and did as he said.

"Still soapy."

He looked thoughtful.

"It could be the shampoo, of course," he said.

I finished throwing up an hour later; it took a day for the retching to die down. During that time, Tom was more agitated than he had ever been. He couldn't sit still but paced about constantly. Word circulated; one of the three boys I'd been with was in hospital, intensive care. The other two, apparently, hadn't been caught.

So what was the problem? I was sober, no one had seen me, it was a day later, and anyway, friends don't rat on friends, do they?

The long hand of the housemaster, Mr. Buckingham — Bugsy — caught up with me at tea time the next day. I was summoned to his study.

"You've heard about Langton?"

"Um — yes, sir," I said, trying to sound puzzled. Langton was the hospital case.

"He's named names, Sutton."

I gulped; Buckingham scowled at me. "Morgan, Robson and...you. I know you're not a troublemaker and I think I can trust you. So I'll ask you to your face. Were you drinking yesterday?"

Oh, please! All I had to say was —

But... he was looking at me just a bit askance, just a bit too carefully. I lowered my head.

"Yes, sir," I said. He nodded.

"I'm glad you said that, Sutton, because that's what Morgan said too." Was there sympathy in his look? "I'll see what I can do with the headmaster because I don't think you deserve expulsion, but don't hold your breath."

I had never seen Tom so upset. He seemed to fold in on himself as though all his strength had left him; as though he had been hit by a terrible tragedy.

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"But it's not so bad," I said foolishly. "He's going to speak up for me, they won't sack me for one offense — "

He was almost in tears.

"They will, they will. I'm so sorry, Will! I tried to get to you in time, I really did, I tried to change it, but I got held up and I couldn't get away...I'm sorry!" When he looked up there were tears in his eyes. He seemed so convinced of my fate that I began to believe it too, despite all my desperate optimism to the contrary.

"You weren't to know, Tom! I mean, I was stupid..."

"You were," he agreed. We held each other's gaze.

"Thank you for sobering me up," I said eventually.

"A pleasure."

"You don't seem surprised."

"No."

I was silent for a bit more. Then —

"You really think they'll throw me out?"

"Yup."

And they did.

We stayed in touch, of course, and still exchanged visits during the holidays. His last words to me as a co-pupil of the same school were:

"If you had a choice, I'd advise you to go to a decent sixth form college and unlearn the damage this place has done. But since you don't, I expect you'll be sent to somewhere just like this."

I was; the only real difference was the lack of Thomas Melton about the place. All the other characters were there, with different names. And now I stood on the touchlines at matches and cheered my new school on against my old.

The sixth form, lower and upper, passed mostly in a blur. The world moved into 1982 with not a war cloud to be seen; those who had heard of them at all thought that the Falkland Islands were off Scotland.

The Argie scum invaded, and we raged at the swine who invaded our sovereign territory and applauded the sending of the task force. It was a military-oriented school with a lot of officers' sons, so a lot of fathers were sent down to the South Atlantic. Some were killed.

The world moved on. The upper sixth dawned and the end of my

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school days was in sight. Margaret Thatcher won her second election victory in 1983, cruising on the Falklands factor. I was old enough to vote and gave mine to the fledgling Social Democrats. Three million unemployed were beginning to wear, even on my far-right conscience.

Back at the old place, Tom of course became a prefect. Not so for me — one thing I had carried with me to my new school was my determination not to be tied down by responsibility. The independence that I prided myself on manifested itself for the first time in an outright refusal to take on obligations.

"A" levels loomed; we sat our prediction exams in the Easter term. On the strength of my predicted two As and a B, I was encouraged to try for Cambridge. Tom set his sights lower; in those days you still had to stay on for an extra term to take the Oxbridge exam and Tom, in one of his letters, said he had no intention of staying incarcerated for a minute more than necessary.

Tom rung me the day my actual results came through and was politely sympathetic about my disastrous three Cs. I didn't know what had gone wrong with me in the exam room. He had two Cs and a B. Reluctantly I turned to the shortlist which I had drawn up in the unlikely event of not making it to Cambridge, and we ended up at the same Midlands redbrick, back together again. I had forgotten how much of my life had depended simply on his presence about the place. It was good to have it once more.

Tom, to my surprise, eschewed maths — his strongest point — completely. Instead he did politics. Politics! He looked almost apologetic.

"It's a change of direction," he admitted, "but so's going to university, in my family. I thought of doing sociology, but I'd be disinherited."

Freshers' year, Winter term, 1983

UNIVERSITY life was wonderful. I relished the new environment and gladly sloughed off all the old snobberies, the old prejudices, the old attitudes that had been ingrained in me by school. From being a despicable snob I became an equally despicable inverted snob. I could flatten my vowels and drop my aitches with the best of them. I experimented with growing

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long hair and a moustache ("What will you do when you grow up, Will?" Tom said) but chickened out and reverted to normal the day before my parents came to visit.

Tom fell into the whole thing like a fish returning to water. He didn't change because he didn't need to. Tom Melton at almost nineteen was just the same as Tom Melton at fourteen — a mature, well balanced character at ease with the world. He knew he had nothing to prove and so never bothered trying to.

Another familiar face was Stephen Gale, of fond memory, whom I had actually found I could like. It's amazing what a leveller just growing up can be. But it was still an eerie feeling when he nervously, and with an embarrassed smile, told me over a cup of coffee that he had joined the Gay Society, he felt happier than ever before, I shouldn't feel offended but he didn't really fancy me ("too gangly"), and could I think of a good way for him to break it to his parents?

I fell in love with a dark-haired girl called Joanna Hughes, whom I met through Tom (she was on his course), and by the end of term we were inseparable. Tom didn't seem to mind that I had poached "his" girl, and when Jo and I became a fixture he gave all the encouragement he could and refused to be a gooseberry.

The most surprising thing was the nondevelopment of Tom's own love life. He remained a bachelor. When I mentioned this, as casually as I could, he shrugged.

"I believe in lasting relationships," he said.

"So do I," I said, a bit self-virtuously.

"I know but..." Tom actually seemed flustered. "However hard I tried, Will, it wouldn't last. That's all."

Tom's nerve giving out on him? Surely not.

"How do you know?" I said.

"Because I'm clever."

It was toward the end of summer, 1984 that Tom and I had our biggest disagreement. Second-year students traditionally lived off-campus and we three were such good friends that surely, he said, it would be good if we moved in together?

I was adamantly against it, and my reasoning must have been

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transparent. My relationship with Jo had still, despite my best efforts, a bit further to go. She was determined to be a one-man-per-lifetime girl and had just about convinced me that sex isn't the be-all and end-all of a relationship; possibly a bonus, which we had yet to enjoy, if I indeed turned out to be said man. I wasn't exactly pawing the ground, but on the other hand, given a year in a flat together, the possibility couldn't be ruled out, could it?

So, much as I liked Tom's company, much as I could even admit to myself that I loved him, I could conjecture times when his presence might not be welcome.

Jo thought it was a great idea ("he'll be someone to talk to if we split up," she said encouragingly), so grinding my teeth as quietly as I could I put my signature next to the other two on the application form.

Second year, Easter holidays, 1985

TOM'S TWENTIETH BIRTHDAY came and went. That was March 1985, the last normal month I was to have for a long time.

One April evening I came up the stairs to our flat and to my surprise smelled chicken roasting. When I went into the kitchen, there was Tom, happily preparing a full Sunday-type meal. He had blown a fortnight's budgeting.

"What are we celebrating?" I asked. He waved an arm about him.

"Roast chicken, roast potatoes, gravy...my favorite meal!"

"Since when?"

"Not for a long time," he admitted, "but when I was a boy I loved it. Mummy always cooked it to welcome me home."

"But — "

"Here, this is for you." He handed me a brown paper package, the size of an exercise book. It had TO TOM boldly inscribed on the front.

"It's not for me, it's for you," I said.

"It will be. I want you to give it to me at eight o'clock this evening. Promise?"

"Why?"

"Just...just an experiment, Will. Please? Put it up there for safe keeping, if you like."

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I shrugged and put it up on the shelf he had indicated.

"All right," I said, and set my watch for eight.

Jo came in a while later.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed. "What are we celebrating?"

"It's an experiment," I said, a bit sarcastic, looking up from the potatoes I was slicing.

"We eat at quarter to eight. Okay?" Tom said.

"Fine," she said.

Tom was a prompt cook. Jo and I sat down and Tom took the chicken out of the oven. He carved it up and served the food onto the plates. We started eating.

Tom had taken three bites when it happened. He choked.

" — Gale!" he shouted, leaping up and spraying food across the table.

"Tom?" said Jo. Tom dropped his cutlery and stared about him, eyes wide and a look of utter bewilderment on his face. He looked down, saw his chair and dropped into it heavily. He jerked his gaze all around the room, as though desperately trying to find a familiar reference point. "W-where am I?"

"Tom, don't be — " I said.

The look in his eyes stopped me. I knew Tom's eyes and it wasn't Tom in there now. There was a stranger, frowning, trying to recognize me.

"Where am I? Who are you? How did I get here?"

"You're Tom Melton," Jo said soothingly. "You know that."

"Yeah, I know who I am..." He peered closely at me, then recoiled. "S-Sutton?" he squeaked.

"It's all right, Tom," I said foolishly, trying to be soothing. "Everything's fine..."

"You... you're Will Sutton, aren't you? *How old are you?*"

"I'm twenty, like you."

"Twenty!"

He went sheet white and looked around in horror. For the first time he really seemed to notice Jo and he blushed.

"Hello," he said shyly. Jo had got her bag and was holding out a mirror.

"Look, Tom. Remember?"

He squinted at himself in the three square inches of glass, and his jaw dropped. He looked up.

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"Have...have you got a bigger mirror anywhere?"

"Bathroom's first on the right," I said. He bolted, and Jo and I stared at each other.

"What's happening?"

"Some kind of breakdown?"

There was a scream from the bathroom. We found him, sobbing, staring at his reflection through his fingers.

"Look at me!" he choked. "Look at me — "

I had a sudden flashback — a memory that was six years old. Tom Melton in the washroom at school, looking in the mirror...

I was about to pursue the train of thought when my watch beeped. Was this how Cinderella felt? It's amazing how doom-laden a clock striking the time can sound. Somehow I knew that Tom, earlier, had been expecting just this to happen. I led Tom gently back into the living room, sat him down and gave him his package.

"This is for you," I said.

It was a red-cloth exercise book, of the type we had had at school. Battered and old, but cared for. Tom opened it and began reading, while we watched. At first he seemed absorbed, then his lips began to tremble, and then with a wail he dropped it and curled up into a corner of the sofa, sobbing again. It was a pathetic sight.

Jo comforted him and I picked the book up. The writing inside was in Tom's own hand, and the first words meant I had to keep on reading.

> "GREETINGS, TIME TRAVELER!!!
>
> Yes, that's right. Time traveler. You are Tom Melton, aged almost 14 in a body aged 20. I'm Tom Melton, aged 20 in a 14-year-old body, and it's a bummer for both of us.
>
> It's 1985, and you're in your second year at university. But take heart, you'll survive. It won't be easy, but you have the best friend any bloke could ever have in Will Sutton. That's about the only good news I have for you; the next best thing is that you're not going to die in the next six years, are you? Think about it, Tommo — "

It made sense. Just. I could remember the scene that Tom went on to describe, back in the changing room in 1979. Tom Melton, bullied and on

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the verge of a breakdown, trembling and muttering that he was about to flip. And flip he did — to six years in the future. His own, personal future.

Tom even produced an analogy.

> "Look at it this way. Your life is a book, and every year is a page. The book has a beginning and a middle and an end. In your case, the book looks okay from the outside and it has the right number of pages, but when you read it you find it was badly bound and twelve of the pages are out of order. You start at the beginning and read up to page 13, but instead of page 14 it has page 21. You read on to page 26 and find the next page is 14. After another six pages you find they're all in order again.
>
> I've been through everything you're going through now and I know exactly how you feel reading this. You're frightened and you're the loneliest boy in the world. Well, you're also the world's leading authority on time travel.
>
> There, that got a smile, didn't it? Keep it up..."

I browsed on through the book. The middle pages were blank, then I came to writing again. He had started from the back. It was a simple listing, he said, of everything he could remember about the six years that lay ahead of Tom now. There were laptop computers, jacuzzis, Yuppies, all recently impinged on my consciousness. Names and places and events I'd never heard of — Kylie and Jason, *Challenger* explodes, Warsaw Pact breaks up, Lockerbie, Hillsborough, the Gold Blend couple, massacre in Tiananmen Square, Berlin Wall comes down, Madonna, Oliver North, AIDS hysteria, the condom comeback, glasnost, the Brighton bombing, Fergie and Andrew, Mikhail and Raisa, George and Barbara, Thatcher's downfall, Chernobyl, *Herald of Free Enterprise*, Terry Waite, Live Aid — no particular order, with no particular consistency of significance, and some (like the Warsaw Pact and the Berlin Wall) that I just couldn't take seriously as predictions. The complete iconography of the eighties and the two years after, past and present and supposedly future, jumbled up at random.

When Tom had calmed down, I gave him the book back to read and

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retired to my room with Jo. We sat on the bed and I told her what the Tom from the past had said.

"I don't know if it was time travel or what," I said, "but I'm sure he did change when he was fourteen, somehow. I mean, I know he changed, I was there! He seemed so well balanced because he had to adjust himself to the world, anchor himself in reality like no one else, because otherwise he was so unsettled. Does that make sense to you?"

Jo had a habit of seeing everyone's point of view.

"And being a teenage boy who suddenly had to be an adult would make anyone grow up fast, wouldn't it?" she said. "So what happens now?"

"According to the book, he lives until — no, hang on..."

It was mind boggling, but once we had sketched it out on the back of an envelope it made sense. Tom's mind/soul/karma/whatever and his body were going to last together for another six years, until 1991, when his mind would be 20 and his body would be 26. Then his mind/soul/etc. would jump *back*, aged 20 and with all its memories, to his nearly-14-year-old body, where one of his first acts would be to cling to Stephen Gale, whisper the names of his various amours in his ear and threaten him with blackmail unless he stopped being a poisonous bully. Six years after that, when his mind was 26 and his body was 20, Tom imagined (and hoped) that his mind would jump forward again and he would be reunited with his body in 1991, when both body and mind would be the same age. That was where the Tom who had cooked tonight's meal was now.

Hopefully.

We looked at each other.

"Shit," I said. "We've got a fourteen-year-old in there, Jo."

"And we're the only people he's got," she said. She held my gaze.

"Oh, shit," I said again. I fell backward onto the bed to think about it. So this was what it was like when your thoughts whirled.

There was a gentle, timid knock at the door, and Tom poked his head round.

"Um...Will?"

"Hmm," I grunted.

"Come in, Tom," Jo said kindly. He sidled in, clutching the book.

"It...it says here..." He held the book out, like a supplicant illustrat-

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ing his point to the Lord with a reference to the scriptures. "It says you'll help me."

He was still trying not to cry. Tom Melton, who had been a pillar of my life for so long, needed me.

"Does it?" I said, as discouragingly as possible. Jo poked me; there was a twinkle in her eyes.

"Look, dear, we've got a boy," she said.

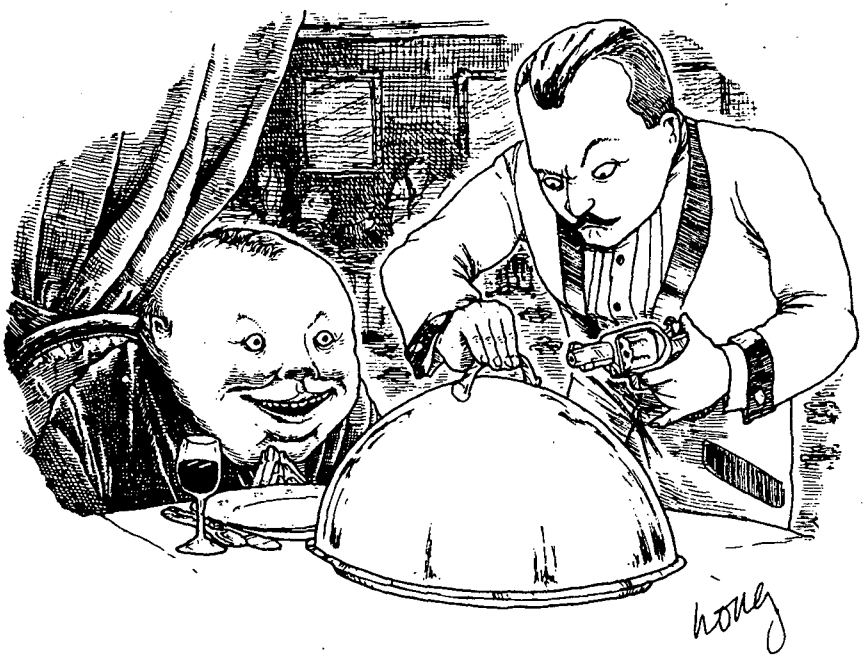
For the third and final time, I said, "Oh, shit."

In front of me was a badly frightened boy, totally alone, dependent purely upon me. I had lived for twenty years without being responsible for anything, but at long last I took on a challenge. And what a challenge! I made a list mentally. Someone had to teach him all his course work, who his friends were, how to drive...

"I'm scared, Will," he said.

"Yeah, me too," I grumped. I waved a hand at a chair. "Sit down, Tom." He sat on the edge of the chair, hardly daring to move. I grinned.

"Sitting comfortably? Then we'll begin..." ⁊



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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

The Only Thing Worse than Yet One More Bad Trilogy

THE JOURNAL OF POPULAR CULTURE

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"What Killed Science Fiction?"
by
Dr. Josiah Carberry,
Professor of English,
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ABSTRACT: The nearly extinct publishing and cinematic genre once known as "science fiction" was born in 1926 and reached its pinnacle in the year 1966, after which a series of unforeseeable catastrophes, both literary and extra-literary, led to its steep decline and virtual disappearance.

Hard as it is to believe today, in our current media landscape devoid of works of fantastic speculation, the worlds of literature and cinema once bade fair to be dominated by a now-forgotten yet once flourishing brand of entertainment called "science fiction." A few surviving aficionados may very well fondly recall favorite works of "SF," as it was familiarly called, while hoarding their disintegrating first editions, flaking pulp magazines and deteriorating film prints, but recent surveys reveal that — far from recognizing the peculiar reading protocols and out-of-print landmarks of the genre — those born since 1966 are mainly ignorant of the very notion of SF. This severing of a generational link, in fact, represents one of the main hurdles to the resurrection of the genre.

Perhaps a very brief survey of SF's glory days is in order first, before examining the factors in its quick and infamous expungement.

When a Welsh immigrant entrepreneur named Hugh Gormsbeck

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launched his magazine *Amazing Stories* in April of 1926, he gathered a disparate body of stories and variety of writers under the rubric "scientifiction," a term later modified to "science fiction." Codifying the rules and playing field of the SF game, so to speak, Gormsbeck paved the way for sustained growth, popularity, and reader-writer camaraderie. For the next forty years, in various venues, the genre acquired an increasing complexity and sophistication, laying down benchmarks of excellence. Moving out of the magazines and into hardcover and paperback format (circa 1950-1960), SF began to produce genuine mature masterpieces, such as Theodore Sturgeon's *Other Than Human* (1953), Alfred Bester's *The Galaxy My Destination* (1957), and Henry Kuttner's *The Nova Mob* (1961).

Concurrently, SF began to infilitrate other media. Radio dramas like *The Shadow Lady* and *Dimension X Squared* thrilled millions. Daily newspaper strips such as *Flashman Gordon, Buckminster Rogers,* and *The Black Flame* vied with bound monthly comics such as *Captain Marvelous, Kimball Kinnison, Galactic Lensman,* and *Superiorman* for the attention of the average, slightly less literate reader. Hollywood weighed in with a variety of entries, ranging from the wonderful — *Things that Might Come* (1936) and *Destination Orbit* (1950) — to the execrable: *I Married a Martian* (1949) and the anticipated but disappointing *Eye in the Sky* (1958).

The end half of the 1950s was a particularly exciting time for SF, as the Red Chinese launch of the first artificial satellite birthed a wider interest in the genre, reflected in dozens of new magazines, paperback publishers and television dramas (eg., Orson Welles's *The Twilight Zone*).

With the dawn of the 1960s, SF appeared primed to explode as a true mass pop phenomenon. "Cult" classics such as Robert Heinlein's *Drifter in a Strange Land* (1961), Thomas Pynchon's *Vril Revival* (1963) and Frank Herbert's *Dunebuggy* (1965) were wholeheartedly embraced by both older and younger readers, flirting with the lower ranks of best-seller lists. Additionally, a vigorous new generation of writers employing sophisticated literary approaches (cf., H. Ellison, S. Delany, R. Zelazny, B. Malzberg, U. Le Guin), had begun to make themselves known.

All looked bright then for SF as the decade reached its midway point. But unbeknownst to all,

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doom for the field in all its manifestations was just around the corner.

And the name of SF's Nemesis was *Star Trek*.

September 8, 1966, 8:30 P.M. EDT. Seldom before has it been possible to nail down so exactly a historical turning point. But in retrospect it was certainly this moment that marked the beginning of the end for SF.

A Hollywood stalwart best known for his aforementioned respectable *Destination Orbit*, George Pal had moved to the medium of television after the large-scale failure of his final theatrical release, the unintentionally hilarious *A Clockwork Orange* in 1965. Conceiving of the imaginary voyage of a 23rd century interstellar cruiser named *The Ambition* as a clever device for using up a quantity of pre-existing stagesets, Pal proceeded to exercise complete (un)creative control over every element of the new show.

Pal's first and biggest mistake was in the casting of his starship crew. Nick Adams played the histrionic Captain Tim Dirk as a third-rate James Dean. The alien officer named Strock was woodenly embodied by an ultra-corpulent Sebastian Cabot. Ship's Doctor "Bones" LeRoi was laughably portrayed by Larry Storch. Engineer "Spotty" (so named for his freckles) found an aging Mickey Rooney far from his prime. And as for the female element — well, an emaciated young model named Twiggy (as Yeoman Sand) and a seedily voluptuous Jayne Mansfield (as Communications Lieutenant Impura) eye-poppingly contrasted each other like the ship's ludicrous "neutron-anti-neutron" drive. Lesser parts were filled with similar wince-provoking choices.

Pal's next major mistake was to insist on writing all the first season's scripts himself, as a money-saving measure. (Longstanding Hollywood rumors, recently confirmed, said that Pal used unsolicited scripts from such novelists as Robert Bloch, Murray Leinster, and a young woman named Joanna Russ for scratch paper.) Ransacking every cliché of SF, as well as plenty from Westerns, WWII films and a dozen other genres, Pal's scripts have to qualify in this critic's opinion as some of the worst writing ever to appear on television.

Given these two major strikes against it, the other factors mitigating against *Star Trek*'s success — primitive special effects, ridiculous villains, costumes more attuned to Oz than outer space, a theme song

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at once maddening and inexpellable from the mind — were mere icing on the cake of disaster.

Nearly every TV viewer of the requisite age can recall where he or she was when that infamous first episode of *Star Trek* (an ultra-confusing time-travel farrago entitled "When Did We Go From Then?") aired. Jumping the gun on the fall season, insuring that its only competition were reruns, the opening minutes of the deadly drama-bomb found millions tuned in. As jaws dropped across the nation and viewers phoned others, the attention-wave surged. By the time the West Coast was treated to the debut of the new series, it had attained the highest ratings of any television show ever presented. This was not, however, a positive sign.

The next day found ridicule unanimous and at a high scathing pitch. Newspaper columnists and editorialists had a heyday with the spectacular failure, as did stage and TV comedians. (Johnny Carson, for instance, devoted his entire opening monologue of September 9 to the episode.) The following week, a special edition of *TV Guide* was given over to an abrasive assessment of *Star Trek* and televised SF in general.

Unwisely, NBC, wowed by Pal's lingering prestige, had already contracted for a full 39 episodes of the new series. And rather than back out or seek help, Pal held the network to the letter of the agreement and bulled ahead in the face of ignominy. Week after week, the viewing public was treated to one stinker of an episode after another. Numerous tag-lines from the series ("He's — he's deceased, Tim!"; "I'm a twenty-third-century physician, dammit, not a Christian Scientist!"; "Bleep me up, Spotty."; "Highly non-axiomatic, Captain.") became the ironic stuff of everyday conversation. And then the inevitable happened. Written SF became tarred with the same brush.

Latent prejudice against "all that Buckminster Rogers stuff," never far from the surface of public consciousness, resurged. To be seen reading an SF book in public became tantamount to wearing a "kick-me" sign on one's back. Whatever literary cachet SF had laboriously earned evaporated overnight.

As sales of book and magazine SF plummeted, fair-weather readers and writers began to desert SF in droves. Bankruptcies — both personal and corporate — proliferated. Movies in mid-production were written off. The field was caught in

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a downward spiral wherein failure begat further failure.

Finally, by 1968, long after *Star Trek*'s demise — brought on by a determined letter-writing campaign organized by true SF fans — yet while memory of its awfulness was still fresh, only a hard core of readers and authors remained, a shabby remnant of a once vital legacy.

There is little doubt that SF had the capacity, literarily, to recover from even a tragedy of this dimension. The field had always been prey to boom-and-bust cycles, and had always bounced back before. It took a set of truly unique, large magnitude, extra-literary cataclysms to finally kill the whole genre, testament to its strength and its inherent appeal to human nature.

First and foremost came the Apollo 11 disaster in 1969. When the Lunar Excursion Module failed to depart the Moon's surface, the whole world was treated to a protracted tragedy that soured any technological optimism left intact by the Vietnam War and the growing awareness of mankind's pollution of his environment (cf., The Earth Day Riots, 1972-75). The perversion of computer technology for the maintenance of "Big Nurse" domestic counterintelligence databases by the FBI under the third Nixon Administration, and the subsequent passage of laws limiting the manufacture of computers to low-capability machines, further diminished the allure of a future dependent on sophisticated machines. A final nail in the coffin of SF was the uncontrolled meltdown at Three Mile Island in 1979. Rightly or wrongly, SF had long been equated with nuclear power in the public's perception, and this seaboard-contaminating catastrophe made SF synonymous with mass carnage.

One final stroke of bad luck appeared in the shape of an underground sixteen-millimeter film that had the misfortune to gain notoriety shortly after TMI. Arising out of the San Francisco pornography scene, *Close Encounters of the Star Wars Kind* was an XXX-rated venture by the then-unknown directing duo of Lucas and Spielberg, starring equally unknown actors and actresses (Charlie Sheen, Rob Lowe, Hugh Grant, Louise Ciccone, Janet Jackson, Hillary Rodham, Sly Stallone, Arnie Schwarzenegger, *et al*). In this repugnant farce, representatives of a decadent interstellar empire made Earth their sex playground, only to meet with resistance from naked rebels who

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turned out to be more lickerish and reprehensible than the tyrants. After the Supreme Court finished with Lucas and Spielberg, no sane person would approach SF with a ten-light-year pole.

Nearly two decades after these various debacles, SF remains a form practiced only by a handful of eccentric amateurs, appearing in mimeographed samizdat publications limited to a circulation of a few hundred maximum (at least in the U.S.; the situation in the U.K. has a complex history of its own. See this author's previously published "The Media Empire of Moorcock and Ballard, Ltd.: Can Murdoch Offer Any Competition?"). That a once-proud literary tradition should have ended up in this state seems inevitable, given the chain of circumstances herein adduced. Yet just for a moment, we might ponder — if it is not venturing too far into an heretical old SF trope known as "the alternate world" — how things might have been different.

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Music is often called the universal language, but the same might be said of sculpture, or painting, or flower arranging...in fact, many forms of artistic expression represent inner truths nonverbally. Does that include spirits!

The World Within

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

ARIA SAT IN THE STRAIGHT-backed chair and trapped her hands between her knees, waiting for the poltergeist. It didn't always come; lots of times when she wished it would show up it did nothing; but today her favorite seventh-grade teacher, Mrs. Bridge, was having tea with Aria and her mother in their little third-floor apartment, and always, always, when Aria least wanted it to come, the poltergeist came.

"Sugar?" Mother asked Mrs. Bridge, who smiled and nodded. Mrs. Bridge was wearing a warm red dress, and Mother wore her violet company dress, faded from washing to almost gray. A hearthfire and smoke, Aria thought. The herbal tea smelled good; below its warmth lingered the faded scent of lavender.

Mother plopped two sugar cubes into Mrs. Bridge's tea cup and glanced at Aria, saw the trapped hands. "Don't!" she said.

Mrs. Bridge, a comfortably large woman, mid-spectrum middle-aged, with short curly brown hair and big red-framed glasses, glanced at Aria, eyebrows up.

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Mother handed Aria the tea cup she had been fixing for Mrs. Bridge. "Drink this. Do something. Don't just sit there, Ari."

Aria loosed her hands and took the tea cup, gulped tea even though it was scalding.

"Excuse me?" said Mrs. Bridge.

"I'm sorry," said Mother. "She was about to have one of her fits."

"Her fits," said Mrs. Bridge. "Ah."

Had she ever had a fit in one of Mrs. Bridge's classes? Aria wondered. She couldn't remember one. What did Mrs. Bridge know?

Mother poured another cup of tea and dropped sugar into it. "Cream?" she asked Mrs. Bridge.

Why did Mother always invite her teachers to the apartment? It hadn't bothered Aria when she was younger, before the poltergeist came. Or, it hadn't bothered her much. She didn't really want teachers seeing how she lived.

Some of the teachers had felt sorry for her, she was sure, when they looked around this little room that was her and her mother's whole world: the murphy bed folded into the wall, its underside decorated with a woven hanging; the narrow doors leading to the closet and the bathroom; the braided oval of rag rug on the floor; the round scarred wooden table they were sitting at, with its navy cloth placemats and the pink plastic vase where Mother always put a sprig of something — even in the dead of winter she would find a twig with a bud on it, or a spray of holly leaves or pine needles; the book shelves beside the radiator under the windows, where a few dark and stained tomes, some from the old country, stood beside the space where Aria kept her library books, which changed each week; the slender selection of vinyl records in the shelf below the little white turntable with its attached speakers; the little black-and-white TV on its own tiny table, with a wire hanger antenna twisted into an eternal lazy 8; the counter against the right-hand wall that held the sink, the stove, the cutting board, and the dish rack, with hanging cabinets above, where Aria and her mother kept food and their few dishes; the little fridge in the corner, disguised with wood-grained brown Contact paper.

A small world, everything in it precious and cared for. Too small for Aria and her mother and the poltergeist, but the poltergeist didn't seem to care. Last year it had thrown a tea cup against the wall and frightened Mr.

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Piper, Aria's sixth grade teacher, right out of the house. The tea cup had broken, too; they only had three left now.

Aria drank more tea, hoping it would quiet Pell. She had never found a surefire method of making the poltergeist behave.

None of the other kids' mothers ever invited teachers home. At least, Aria had never heard of it. But then again, she wasn't exactly in the gossip stream at school.

She didn't think other people drank tea with teachers, either. She never saw television children drinking tea. When television people used tea cups, they drank coffee, except the ones on PBS.

"Cream," said Mrs. Bridge. "Yes, please."

Mother added a ribbon of cream to the tea. Aria watched it slide beneath the surface and then rise again from the bottom, billowing like a cloud just before Mother stirred it with a spoon and then offered the cup, spoon, saucer, and a napkin to Mrs. Bridge.

"Thank you so much for making time in your busy schedule to stop in and see us," Mother said to Mrs. Bridge.

"My pleasure," said Mrs. Bridge, accepting a sugar-sprinkled butter cookie from the plate Mother held out to her. "I'm always pleasantly surprised when a parent takes an interest in a child's education."

"I have high hopes for Ari," Mother said, glancing at Aria, offering her a cookie. Aria took one. There were only five. Two each for Mother and Mrs. Bridge, one for her. She had better make this one last.

"Yes?" said Mrs. Bridge. Somehow she sounded a shade less friendly than she had a moment before.

"She's doing well in school, isn't she? She doesn't tell me much about her days," Mother said.

Aria sipped tea and watched one of her library books slide slowly toward the edge of its shelf.

"I think that's a matter for you to discuss with Aria," said Mrs. Bridge.

"But — " said Mother. "She really doesn't say much."

Mrs. Bridge looked at Aria. She smiled. "What do you think, Ari? Are you doing well in school?"

The book jumped out of the shelf and thumped on the floor.

Mrs. Bridge, seated with her back to the windows, glanced over her shoulder at the fallen book.

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"Ari," said Mother, her voice fading.

"I'm doing fine," Aria said loudly as the book stood on its end, then opened with a flutter of pages.

"That's right," said Mrs. Bridge, watching the book. "She's doing fine."

The book thumped over, playing dead.

"And your hopes?" Mrs. Bridge asked.

"Pardon me?" said Mother.

"You mentioned something about your hopes for your daughter," said Mrs. Bridge.

"Did I? I — I — well, I..."

"Do you have hopes, Ari?" Mrs. Bridge asked, staring into Aria's eyes.

"No," said Aria. She looked at her cookie. It was one of the pretzel-shaped ones. Maybe she would lick the sugar crystals from it one at a time. There were a lot of them.

"What do you think about your mother's hopes for you? Do you know what they are?"

"She wants me to be an opera singer," Aria said. She glanced at the record player on the bookshelf. Some of the opera records were so old and scratched Mother didn't even try to play them anymore. The skips interrupted the singers too often.

"What do you want, Aria?"

"I don't know," Aria said. Books fluttered from the shelf, thumping on the rug, each thump a punctuation.

Mrs. Bridge turned and watched the books, which thumped down, jumped on end, thumped down again, stacked themselves.

Mother's hands were clutched so tight about her tea cup the knuckles showed white. Her mouth was open and her eyes stared, but not at the books or anything in the room. Aria had seen her go to this not-here place before, some evenings when Pell was louder and more irritating than usual. Never before with company right in the room.

"Who knows what you want?" Mrs. Bridge asked, watching the books. The books opened and clapped loudly in a chorus.

"Who cares what I want?" Aria said. Why was Mrs. Bridge asking questions? Why wasn't she screaming out the door as others had done before her? How could she just sit there and watch the books dance, as though she saw such things every day?

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The books fell to the floor as if they had never been animated.

"I, for one, would like to know," said Mrs. Bridge.

What do I want? Aria wondered. She glanced around the apartment. The records — all her mother's. No CDs here. No money for them, no desire for them — at least, her mother had no desire for them. The fragments of tunes and songs Aria heard from other apartments in the building, from boom boxes and car windows and the windows of houses Aria walked past on her way to schoool, the "new music" her mother said was not music, all these scraps of sound called to Aria. Everyone else knows my language, music sang, and you, you are not allowed to hear and learn it.

She thought of sitting in the music room and pounding on a wood block while the other children had instruments to play. She had talked to Mr. Steel about renting an instrument. A clarinet, she thought, a tone like melted butter, a range from the stars above to the bottom of the sea. But her mother had only a little money, and none for things like instrument rental.

"You are your instrument," Mother would say. "Take care of your voice. Train it. Use it. Sing this chorus again." Sheet music from a thrift store, words whose meaning Aria did not know but whose sound she learned from listening to the records. She practiced half an hour every afternoon, when she came home from school and before most of the people in neighboring apartments came home from work. She didn't want anyone to hear her. She was afraid of her voice. Sometimes when she sang it got loud. It got away from her. It soared, carrying the tune.

She would sing for her mother in the evenings, trying to keep her voice softer than it wanted to be. Her mother would listen and smile.

Lately, Pell had slammed doors while Aria sang for her mother. Mostly the bathroom door. Slam slam slam. "O, holy night," slam, "the stars are brightly shiiiiining," slam. Mother thought Aria could sing at school in the Christmas show; surely if she had a prepared piece, they could find a place for her in the program. Slam. Aria had never sung where anyone but Mother or Pell could hear her.

Slam.

Then there was paint. Mrs. Bridge taught English and art. She gave Aria poster paints and construction paper and Aria had spent whole hours

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stroking colors side by side onto paper. She swirled things. She got mud brown colors by mixing, and then she learned to mix for creamy orange and light purple and pale green. While other people did whatever projects Mrs. Bridge assigned each day, Aria sat with her colors in front of her and made pictures that didn't look like anything you could see when you looked around an apartment or a street. Just swirls and pools of color.

Sometimes she painted with her fingers. Sometimes she mixed up colors and pressed her hands into them and then slapped her hands onto the paper.

Aria rarely brought her pictures home. Mother didn't like them. "Can't you do a nice still life?" she had asked.

Mrs. Bridge liked them, though. She had asked to keep some.

Then there was science class, where Ms. Claire taught them the world in pieces and puzzles. Shake up these body parts and then assemble them into a body. There was a certain romance in piecing together a bird from pinions and down and muscles and organs and hollow bones and the lace of nerves and branching trees of blood vessels. Aria loved the language of science: thorax, abdomen, mandible, proboscis; style, stigma, ovary...

She was not sure she would want to spend the rest of her life buried under such language, so many details. She liked them; she could build walls with them; but were walls enough, when she could have color or music instead?

Aria looked at Mrs. Bridge. "Any news?" Mrs. Bridge asked.

"What?" said Aria.

"Do you know yet what you want?"

"No," said Aria.

"Well, you're young yet. You have time to try different things."

"You know what you want," said Mother. "Your marvelous instrument! Your beautiful voice!"

The record player leaped high into the air, then smashed down on the floor, its casing broken, parts spilling from it.

"Pell!" Aria said. "No!"

The albums shot from their sleeves on the shelf, sliced through the air between the people sitting at the table, and crashed into the wall beside the entrance, shattered, fragments sliding down into sharp-edged rubble on the floor.

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Tears ran down Mother's face. She cried without sound except a hitch in her breath.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry," Aria muttered, wrapping her arms around her head, elbows jutting out. "I'll be good I'll be extra good I'll be so good you don't know I'm here..."

"My music. All my music...I can never replace those records," Mother said, her voice strangled. She sniffed. She patted the tears from her face with her napkin. "Never."

"Tell me their titles," said Mrs. Bridge. "I'll see what I can do about getting you replacements. I'm sorry. I feel responsible."

"How can you be responsible when it's Ari who does these things?" Mother said.

There it was. Usually Aria did not discuss Pell with Mother. Usually Pell did small irritating things and both of them pretended this was just some normal inconvenience that everyone had to deal with at home. Mother had never before blamed Aria for what Pell did. Not directly, anyway.

Aria, mired in guilt and the spill of sorries, rocked in her chair and hid her head with her arms. If only Pell would go away and never never never come back. Pell wrecked everything. Pell broke things. Pell scared people. Pell hurt Mother.

Mrs. Bridge touched her arm. "Aria," she said. She poured tea, sugared it, tugged Aria's arm down. "Here, sweetie."

It took Aria a while to stop rocking and scratching herself up on the inside. Pell had never broken something so important before. Mostly Pell thumped things that wouldn't break. But the tea cup last year, that had hurt a lot. Not as much as the loss of the records, though.

She managed to stop saying she was sorry. She took the tea from Mrs. Bridge and sipped it. The feeling of being a horrible evil person didn't go away.

She glanced at Mother's face, saw the lines of suffering. The music was one of the few things that made Mother feel better when she came home from work. How often in the evening Aria had watched Mother as Mother listened to the music, her eyes looking at something far away and beautiful, something that carried her away from a world of dirty dishes and steaming water and the realities of a vanished husband, few job skills, and a stack of leftover bills from a previous life.

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Aria would not forgive Pell for this deed. "How could you?" she whispered. "How could you?"

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Bridge said again. "I think I asked the wrong questions."

"I can't bear it any longer," Mother said. She looked around their room, their world. No place was distant from any other place. Every place was in view. "I must go."

She rose, grabbed her purse and jacket, and rushed out.

"Oh, Aria," Mrs. Bridge said, "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"It's not your fault," said Aria. "How could it be? It's my fault, isn't it? I don't understand it. I don't see a Pell on television very often. I never see a Pell at school. Am I the only one who has a Pell?"

"No," said Mrs. Bridge.

"I mean, I know Pell is a poltergeist. There's a word for it. I just don't know anyone else who has one." Aria rose, got the trash can. She went to where the records lay in pieces and picked them up, wondering if she could glue them together and bring the music back to life. The pieces were too small and many. She didn't know if she could mend things with Mother, either.

"You don't seem surprised by this," Aria said, putting the pieces in the trash carefully, as though there was anything worse that could happen to them.

"Surprised? By the Pell, you mean?" asked Mrs. Bridge.

"Did you know about Pell before you came over?"

"No. Not exactly. I knew there was something different about you."

Aria sat back on her heels and looked at her teacher. "Different?" She couldn't remember ever being different. Most of the time she was silent, but there were a number of other kids in school who were quiet too. If she raised her hand, she never raised it high. If she had an answer, it was a boring one. If a teacher forced her to participate, she was subdued. "How could you tell?"

"The pictures," said Mrs. Bridge. "The things you paint."

"Things? But I don't paint things."

"You do. You paint things people don't see with their normal eyes."

"I don't understand."

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"I don't think I can explain it any more clearly, dear. The things you paint are visions seen with something beyond sight. I've seen such pictures before. I came to visit because I wanted to make sure you don't lose those visions unless you are ready to let go of them. I know you don't take your pictures home. I've found them in the garbage before. So I suspected your mother wasn't very supportive of your art."

Aria sat with chunks of broken record in each hand and looked up at her teacher. She saw that Mother's abandoned tea cup rose from the table. "No!" she yelled. "No, Pell, not another one!"

The cup flew at the wall above where she crouched. It splashed tea on the wall, then drifted back to settle sedately on its saucer on the table.

Aria looked at the wall. There was an explosion there in pale brown against the white paint.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bridge, as Aria jumped up and got a sponge out of the sink. "I don't know if your hopes include painting, Aria. If they do, I would hate to see you give it up."

Aria wiped some of the tea from the wall. "Her hopes are more important than mine," she said in a low voice. "She has suffered so."

"I see," said Mrs. Bridge.

"She takes care of me."

"Yes."

"She hates her job."

"Ah."

"I don't know where she just went. She doesn't really like the neighbors. It's cold out."

"She'll be back," said Mrs. Bridge.

Aria got the whisk broom and dust pan and swept up the final fragments of records. "I don't know when she'll forgive me for this."

"Give me some paper. I'll write down the album titles and see how many I can replace."

"Why? Why would you do that, Mrs. Bridge?"

"Because this world is so small, too small for two people when one won't forgive the other. And because I am glad to learn about Pell. I thought perhaps you needed a champion. I'm glad you already have one."

"A champion?" Aria said. She thought of all the annoying things Pell did, the trouble Pell caused. Sometimes Pell made the bed jump when Aria

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and her mother were already asleep. Sometimes the lights went on and off even when Aria was reading. Sometimes things disappeared — a pair of earrings, the house keys — and couldn't be found; hours later or sometimes days, the things turned up right where they had been before they disappeared. Aria had never seen a pattern in the haunting. It had just been one long chain of annoyances.

"Pell won't let your heart smother," said Mrs. Bridge. She went to the bookshelf, pulled out the album covers and brought them to the table.

Two sheets of lined paper shot out of Aria's school notebook and drifted down in front of Mrs. Bridge.

"Thank you," she said, smiling, and pulled a pen out of her purse.

"You're welcome," Aria whispered. She looked at what was left of the tea splash. Some kind of vision. She could almost see a forest. Trees, anyway. She studied it a little while before she wiped it away.

"Thank you very much. Next!"

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Rules were made to be broken, so the adage goes. But what about vows? A vow should never be broken—but observe how far they'll sometimes bend...

The Seventh Chapter

By Harry Turtledove

THE SNOW WAS FALLING harder now. Kassianos' mule, a good stubborn beast, kept slogging forward until it came to a drift that reached its belly. Then it stopped, looking reproachfully back over its shoulder at the priest.

"Oh, very well," he said, as if it could understand. "This must be as Phos wills. That town the herder spoke of can't be far ahead. We'll lay over in — what did he call it? — Develtos till the weather gets better. Are you satisfied, beast?"

The mule snorted and pressed ahead. Maybe it *did* understand, Kassianos thought. He had done enough talking at it, this past month on the road. He loved to talk, and had not had many people to talk to. Back in Videssos the city, his clerical colleagues told him he was mad to set out for Opsikion so late in the year. He hadn't listened; that wasn't nearly so much fun as talking.

"Unfortunately, they were right," he said. This time, the mule paid

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him no attention. It had reached the same conclusion a long time ago.

The wind howled out of the north. Kassianos drew his blue robe more tightly about himself, not that that did much good. Because the road from the capital of the Empire to Opsikion ran south of the Paristrian mountains, he had assumed they would shield him from the worst of the weather. Maybe they did. If so, though, the provinces on the other side of the mountains had winters straight from the ice of Skotos' hell.

Where was he? For that matter, where was the road? When it ran between leaf-bare trees, it had been easy enough to follow. Now, in more open country, the pesky thing had disappeared. In better weather, that would only have been a nuisance (in better weather, Kassianos reminded himself, it wouldn't have happened). In this blizzard, it was becoming serious. If he went by Develtos, he might freeze before he could find shelter.

He tugged on the reins. The mule positively scowled at him: what was he doing, halting in the cold middle of nowhere? "I need to find the town," he explained. The mule did not look convinced.

He paused a moment in thought. He had never been to Develtos, had nothing from it with him. That made worthless most of the simpler spells of finding he knew. He thought of one that might serve, then promptly rejected it: it involved keeping a candle lit for half an hour straight. "Not bloody likely, I'm afraid," he said.

He thought some more, then laughed out loud. "As inelegant an application of the law of similarity as ever there was," he declared, "but it will serve. Like *does* call to like."

He dismounted, tied the mule's reins to a bush so it would not wander off while he was incanting. Then, after suitable prayers and passes, he undid his robe and pissed — quickly, because it was very cold.

His urine did not just form a puddle between his feet. Instead, impelled by his magic, it drew a steaming line in the snow toward more like itself, and thus, indirectly, toward the people who made it.

"That way, eh?" Kassianos said, eyeing the direction of the line. "I might have known the wind would make me drift south of where I should be." He climbed back onto his mule, urged it forward. It went eagerly, as if it sensed he knew where he was going again.

Sure enough, not a quarter of an hour later the priest saw the walls of Develtos looming tall and dark through the driving snow. He had to ride

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around a fair part of the circuit before he came to a gate. It was closed and barred. He shouted. Nothing happened. He shouted again, louder.

After a couple of minutes, a peephole opened. "Who ye be?" the man inside called, his accent rustic. "Show yerself to me and give me your name."

"I am Kassianos, eastbound from Videssos the city," the priest answered. He rode a couple of steps closer, lowered his hood so the guard could see not only his blue robe but also his shaven head. "May I have shelter before I am too far gone to need it?"

He did not hear anyone moving to unlatch the gate. Instead, the sentry asked sharply, "Just the one of you there?"

"Only myself. In Phos' holy name I swear it." Kassianos understood the gate-guard's caution. Winter could easily make a bandit band desperate enough to try to take a walled town, and falling snow give them the chance to approach unobserved. A quick rush once the gate was open, and who could say what horrors would follow?

But Kassianos must have convinced the guardsman. "We'll have you inside in a minute, holy sir." The fellow's voice grew muffled as he turned his face away from the peephole. "Come on, Phostis, Evagrios, give me a hand with this bloody bar." Kassianos heard it scrape against the iron-faced timbers of the gate.

One of the valves swung inward. The priest dug his heels into the mule's flanks. It trotted into Develtos. The sentries closed the gate after it, shoved the bar back into place. "Thank you, gentlemen," Kassianos said sincerely.

"Aye, you're about this far from being a snowman, aren't you, holy sir?" said the guard who had been at the peephole. Now Kassianos could see more of him than a suspicious eyeball: he was short and lean, with a knitted wool cap on his head and a sheepskin jacket closed tight over a chainmail shirt. His bow was a hunter's weapon, not a soldier's. He was, in other words, a typical small-town guardsman.

"Want I should take you to Branas' tavern, holy sir, let you warm yourself up outside and in?" asked one of the other guards. But for a back-and-breast of boiled leather and a light spear in place of a bow, he was as like the first as two peas in a pod. He glanced toward that man, who was evidently his superior. "Is it all right, Tzitas?"

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"Aye, go on, Phostis, we'll manage here." Tzitas showed his teeth in a knowing grin. "Just don't spend too much time warming yourself up in there."

"Wouldn't think of it," Phostis said righteously.

"No, you wouldn't; you'd do it," said Evagrios, who'd been quiet till then. Tzitas snorted.

Phostis sent them both a rude gesture. He turned back to the priest. "You come with me, holy sir. Pay these scoffers no mind." He started off down the street. His boots left pockmarks in the snow. Still on muleback, Kassianos followed.

The tavern was less than a hundred yards away. (Nothing in Develtos, come to that, looked to be more than a quarter mile from anything else. The town barely rated a wall.) In that short journey, though, Phostis asked Kassianos about Videssos the city four different times, and told him twice of some distant cousin who had gone there to seek his fortune. "He must have found it, too," Phostis said wistfully, "for he never came back no more."

He might have starved trying, Kassianos thought, but the priest was too kind to say that out loud. Videssos' capital drew the restless and ambitious from all over the Empire, and in such fast company not all could flourish.

Even with Phostis', "Here we are, holy sir," Kassianos could have guessed which building was Branas' from the number of horses and donkeys tied up in front of it. He found space at the rail for his mule, then went in after the sentry.

He shut the door behind him so none of the blessed heat inside would escape. A few quick steps brought him to the fireplace. He sighed in pure animal pleasure as the warmth began driving the ice from his bones. When he put a hand to his face, he discovered he could feel the tip of his nose again. He'd almost forgotten he still owned it.

After roasting a bit longer in front of the flames, Kassianos felt restored enough to find a stool at a table close by. A barmaid came over, looked him up and down. "What'll it be?" she asked, matter-of-fact as if he were carpenter rather than priest.

"Hot red wine, spiced with cinnamon."

She nodded, saucily ran her hand over his shaved pate. "That'll do it for you, right enough." Her hips worked as she walked back to the tapman

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with his order; she looked over her shoulder at the priest, as if to make sure he was watching her.

His blood heated with a warmth that had nothing to do with the blaze crackling in the fireplace. He willed himself to take no notice of that new heat. Celibacy went with Phos' blue robe. He frowned a little. Even the most shameless tavern wenches knew that. Clerics were men too, and might forget their vows, but he still found an overture as blatant as this girl's startling. Even in the jaded capital, a lady of easy virtue would have been more discreet. The same should have gone double for this back-country town.

The barmaid returned with his steaming mug. As he fumbled in his beltpouch for coppers to pay the score, she told him, "You want to warm up the parts fire and wine don't reach, you let me know." Before he could answer, someone called to her from a table halfway across the room. She hurried off, but again smiled back at Kassianos as she went.

Before he lifted the cup to his lips, he raised his hands to heaven and intoned the usual Videssian prayer before food or drink: "We bless thee, Phos, lord with the great and good mind, by thy grace our protector, watchful beforehand that the great test of life may be decided in our favor." Then he spat in the rushes to show his rejection of Skotos. At last he drank. The cinnamon nipped his tongue like a playful lover. The figure of speech would not have occurred to him a moment before. Now it seemed only too appropriate.

When his mug was empty, he raised a finger. The girl hurried over. "Another, please," he said, setting more coppers on the table.

She scooped them up. "For some silver — " She paused expectantly.

"My vows do not allow me carnal union. What makes you think I take them lightly?" he asked. He kept his voice mild, but his eyes seized and held hers. He had overawed unrepentant clerics in the ecclesiastical courts of the capital; focusing his forensic talents on a chit of a barmaid reminded him of smashing some small crawling insect with an anvil. But she had roused his curiosity, if not his manhood.

"The monks hereabouts like me plenty well," she sniffed; she sounded offended he did not find her attractive. "And since you're a man from Videssos the city itself" (news traveled fast, Kassianos thought, unsurprised), "I reckoned you'd surely be freer yet."

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Along with its famed riches, the capital also had a reputation in the provinces as a den of iniquity. Sometimes, Kassianos knew, it was deserved. But not in this... "You are mistaken," the priest replied. "The monks like you well, you say?"

The girl's eyes showed she suddenly realized the hole she had dug for herself. "I'm not the only one," she said hastily. "There's a good many women they favor here in town, most of 'em a lot more than me."

She contradicted herself, Kassianos noted, but never mind that now. "Are there indeed?" he said, letting some iron come into his voice. "Perhaps you will be so good as to give me their names?"

"No. Why should I?" She had spirit; she could still defy him.

He dropped the anvil. "Because I am Kassianos, *nomophylax* — chief counsel, you might say — to the most holy ecumenical Patriarch Tarasios, prelate of Videssos the city and Videssos the Empire. I was summoned to Opsikion to deal with a troublesome case of false doctrine there, but I begin to think the good god Phos directed me here instead. Now speak to me further of these monks."

The barmaid fled instead. Eyes followed her from all over the taproom, then turned to Kassianos. The big man whose place was behind the bar slowly ambled over to his table. As if by chance, he held a stout club in his right fist. "Don't know what you said to little Laskara, blue-robe," he said casually, "but she didn't much like it."

"And I, friend, did not much like her seeking to lead me astray from my vows, and liked even less her telling me the monks hereabouts are accustomed to ignoring theirs," Kassianos answered. "I do not think the most holy Tarasios, Phos bless him, would like that either. Perhaps if I root out the evil, it will never have to come to his attention."

At the mention of that name, the tapman sat down heavily beside Kassianos, as if his legs no longer wanted to support him. The priest heard him drop the bludgeon among the dried rushes on the floor. "The — Patriarch?" the fellow said hoarsely.

"The very same." Kassianos' eyes twinkled. Most of the time, being *nomophylax* was nothing but drudgery. Sometimes, as now, it was fun. "Suppose you tell me about the lecherous monks you have here. Your Laskara thought I was of the same stripe as they, and tried to sell herself to me."

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"Aye, we have a monastery here, dedicated to the holy Tralitzes, Phos bless his memory." The tapman drew the good god's sun-circle over his heart. Kassianos had never heard of the local saint, but that hardly signified: every little town had some patron to commemorate. The tapman went on, "But the monks, lecherous? No, holy sir — they're good men, pious men, every one."

He sounded sincere, and too shaken to be lying so well. "Do they then conform to the rules set down by the holy Pakhomios, in whose memory all monks serve?" Kassianos asked.

"Holy sir, I'm no monk. Far as I know, they do, but I dunno what all these rules and things is." The fellow was sweating, and not from the fireplace's being near.

"Very well, then, hear the seventh chapter of Pakhomios' *Rule*, the chapter entitled 'On Women': 'To ensure the preservation of the contemplative life, no brother shall be permitted to entertain women.'"

"I dunno about any of that," the tapman insisted. With a sudden access of boldness, he went on, "And it's not me you should ought to be going after if you've got somewhat against our monks. You take that up with the abbot — Menas, is name is."

"I shall," Kassianos promised. "Believe me, I shall."

THE HOLY TRALITZES' monastery lay a couple of miles outside Develtos. Monks working in the snowy fields and gardens looked up from their labors as Kassianos rode toward Phos' temple, the largest building of the monastery complex. It was further distinguished from the others by a spire topped with a gilded globe.

An elderly monk came out of the temple, bowed courteously to Kassianos. "Phos with you, holy sir," he said. "I am Pleuses, porter of the monastery. How may I serve you?"

Kassianos dismounted, returned the bow. "And with you, brother Pleuses. I have come to see your abbot — Menas is his name, is it not? I am Kassianos, *nomophylax* to Tarasios. Would you announce me to the holy abbot?"

Pleuses' eyes widened. He bowed once more. "Certainly, holy sir. Menas will surely be honored to entertain such a distinguished guest." He

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shouted for a younger brother to take charge of Kassianos' mule, then, bowing a third time, said, "Will you come with me?"

The abbot's residence lay beyond the dormitory that housed the rest of the monks. "Wait here a moment, will you?" Pleuses said at the doorway. He went in and, as promised, quickly returned. "He will see you now."

Kassianos was expecting a leering voluptuary. The sight of Menas came as something of a shock. He was a thin, pleasant-faced man of about forty-five, with laugh lines crinkling the corners of his eyes. Among the codices and scrolls on bookshelves behind him were many, both religious and secular, that Kassianos also esteemed.

The abbot rose, bowed, hurried up to clasp Kassianos' hand. "Phos bless you, holy sir, and welcome, welcome. Will you take wine?"

"Thank you, father abbot."

Menas poured with his own hands. While he was doing so, he asked, "May I be permitted to wonder why such an illustrious cleric has chosen to honor our humble monastery with his presence?"

Kassianos' eyes flicked to Pleuses. Menas followed his glance, and dismissed the porter with a few murmured words. The abbot was no fool, Kassianos thought. Well, abbots were not chosen to be fools. The two men performed the usual Videssian ritual over wine, then Menas returned to his own seat and waved Kassianos to the other, more comfortable, chair in the room. The abbot's question still hung in the air.

"Father abbot," Kassianos began, more carefully than he had intended before meeting Menas, "I came to Develtos by chance a few days ago, compelled by the blizzard to take shelter here. In Branas' tavern, a chance remark led me to believe the monks practiced illegal, immoral cohabitation with women, contrary to the strictures of the seventh chapter of the holy Pakhomios' *Rule*."

"That is not so," Menas said quietly. "We follow the *Rule* in all its particulars."

"I am glad to hear you say that." Kassianos nodded. "But I must tell you that my inquiries since I came here made me think otherwise. And, father abbot, they make me believe this not only of your flock but of yourself."

"Having once said that I adhere to Pakhomios' *Rule*, I do not suppose

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that mere repetition will persuade you I speak truly," Menas said after a moment's thought. He grinned wryly; shaven head and gray-streaked beard or no, it made him look very young. "And, having now once said something you do not believe, I cannot hope you will accept my oath." He spread his hands. "You see my difficulty."

"I do." Kassianos nodded again. He thought better of Menas for not gabbling oaths that, as the abbot pointed out, had to be thought untrustworthy. He had not expected or wanted to think better of Menas. He had wanted to get on with the business of reforming the monastery. Things did not seem as simple as he'd thought. Well, as *nomophylax* he'd had that happen to him often enough.

"I will follow any suggestion you may have on resolving this difficulty," Menas said, as if reading his thoughts.

"Very well, then: I know a decoction under whose influence you *will* speak truth. Are you willing to drink it down and then answer my questions?"

"So long as you are asking about these alleged misdeeds, certainly."

Menas showed no hesitation. If he was an actor, he was a good one, Kassianos thought. But no one could dissemble under the influence of this potion, no matter how he schooled himself beforehand.

"I shall compound the drug this evening and return to administer it tomorrow morning," the *nomophylax* said. Menas nodded agreement. Kassianos wondered how brash he would be once his lascivious secrets were laid bare.

The abbot peered curiously at the small glass flask. He held it to his nose, sniffed. "Not a prize vintage," he observed with a chuckle. He tossed the drug down, screwed up his face at the taste.

Kassianos admired his effrontery, if nothing else. He waited for a few minutes, watched the abbot's expression go from its usual amused alertness to a fixed, vacant stare. The *nomophylax* rose, passed a hand in front of Menas' face. Menas' eyes did not follow the motion. Kassianos nodded to himself. Sure enough, the decoction had taken hold.

"Can you hear me?" he asked.

"Aye." Menas' voice was distant, abstracted.

"Tell me, then, of all the violations of the holy Pakhomios' *Rule* that

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have occurred among the monks of this monastery over the past half a year."

Menas immediately began to obey: the drug robbed him of his own will and left him perfectly receptive to Kassianos' question. The *nomophylax* settled back in his chair and listened as Menas spoke of this monk's quarrel with that one, of the time when three brothers got drunk together, of the monk who missed evening prayers four days running, of the one who had refused to pull weeds until he was disciplined, of the one who had sworn at an old man in Develtos, of the monk who had stolen a book but tried to put the blame on another, and on and on, all the petty squabbles to which monasteries, being made up of men, were prone.

Kassianos kept pen poised over parchment, ready to note down every transgression of chapter seven of the *Rule*. Menas talked and talked and talked. The pen stayed poised. Kassianos wrote nothing, for the abbot gave him nothing to write.

Menas, at length, ran dry. Kassianos scowled, ran a hand over his smooth pate. "Do you recall nothing more?" he demanded harshly.

"Nothing, holy sir." Menas' voice was calm; it would not have changed had Kassianos held his hand to the flame flickering in the lamp on the table beside him. The *nomophylax* knew he was deeply under the influence of the potion. He also knew the monks of the monastery of the holy Tralitzes had illicit congress with a great many women of Develtos. His inquiries in the town had left him as certain of that as he was of Phos' eventual victory over Skotos.

Kassianos hesitated before asking his next question. But, having failed with a general inquiry, he saw no choice but to probe specifically at the rot he knew existed: "Tell me of every occasion when the monks of this monastery have transgressed against the seventh chapter of the holy Pakhomios' *Rule*, the chapter which forbids the brethren to entertain women."

Menas was silent. Kassianos wondered if the abbot could somehow be struggling against the decoction. He shook his head — he knew perfectly well it was irresistible. "Why do you not speak?" the *nomophylax* snapped.

"Because I know of no occasion when the monks of this monastery have transgressed against the seventh chapter of the holy Pakhomios' *Rule*, the chapter which forbids the brethren to entertain women."

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The rotelike repetition of his words and the tone of the abbot's voice convinced Kassianos that Menas was still drugged. So did the reason he gave for staying quiet before. If someone under this potion had nothing to say in response to a question, he would keep right on saying nothing until jogged by a new one. Which, depressingly, was just what Menas had done.

Kassianos sighed. He neither liked nor approved of paradoxes. Knowing that because of the decoction he was only being redundant, he nevertheless asked, "Do you swear by Phos you have told me the truth?"

"I swear by Phos I have told you the truth," Menas replied.

The *nomophylax* ground his teeth. If Menas swore under the drug that the monks of the monastery of the holy Tralitzes were obeying Pakhomios' *Rule*, then they were, and that was all there was to it. So act as though you believe it, Kassianos told himself. He could not.

He was tempted to walk out of Menas' study and let the abbot try to deal with the monastery's affairs while still in the grip of the potion. He had played that sort of practical joke while a student at the Sorcerers' Collegium. Regretfully, he decided it was beneath the dignity of the Patriarch's *nomophylax*. He sat and waited until he was sure Menas had come around.

"Remarkable," the abbot said when he was himself again. "I felt quite beside myself. Had we been guilty of any transgressions of the sort you were seeking, I would not have been able to keep them from you."

"That, father abbot, was the idea," Kassianos said tightly. He knew he should have been more courteous, but could not manage it, not with the feeling something was wrong still gnawing at him. But, not having anything on which to focus his suspicions, he could only rise abruptly and go out into the cold for the ride to Develtos.

He kept asking questions when he got back into town. The answers he got set him stewing all over again. They were not given under the influence of his decoction, but they were detailed and consistent from one person to the next. They all painted the monks of the monastery of the holy Tralitzes as the lechers he had already been led to believe them.

How, then, had Menas truthfully asserted that he and his flock followed Pakhomios' *Rule*?

The question nagged at Kassianos like the beginnings of a toothache for the rest of the day. By this time the snowstorm had long since blown

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itself out; he could have gone on to Opsikion. It never occurred to him. After taking his evening meal in Branas' taproom, he went up to the cubicle he had rented over it.

There he sat and thought and fumed. Maybe Menas had found an antidote to his potion. But if he had, it was one that had eluded all the savants at the Sorcerers' Collegium for all the centuries of Videssos' history. That was possible, but not likely. Was it likelier than a deliberate campaign of slander against the abbot's monks? The *nomophylax* could not be sure, but he thought both ideas most improbable. And they were the best ones he had.

He pounded a fist against his knee. "What can Menas be up to, anyway?" he said out loud. Then he blinked, surprised at himself. "Why don't I find out?"

Normally, he would have dismissed the thought with the same automatic discipline he used to suppress the longing of his flesh for women. Spying sorcerously on a man who had proven himself innocent under drugged interrogation went against every instinct Kassianos had. On the other hand, so did believing Menas.

If the abbot is blameless, Kassianos told himself, I'll perform an act of penance to make up for the sin I commit in spying on him like this. Having salved his conscience, the *nomophylax* set about preparing the spell he would need.

The law of similarity was useless to him here, but the law of contagion applied: once in contact, always in contact. Kassianos scraped a bit of skin from the palm of his right hand with a small sharp knife — because that hand had clasped Menas', it still held an affinity for the abbot.

As Kassianos' incantation built, a cloud of smoke grew in his cubicle. It was no ordinary cloud, though, for it formed a rectangle with edges so precise they might have been defined by an invisible picture frame. The analogy pleased Kassianos, for when he spoke a final word of command, the smoke would indeed yield a picture of what Menas was about.

He spoke the word. The trapped smoke before him roiled, grew still. Color began seeping into it, here and there. The first thing the *nomophylax* clearly made out was the roaring fire in one corner of his magical image. He frowned; the blaze was bigger than any the hearth in the abbot's dwelling could contain.

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Of itself, of course, that meant nothing. Menas could have any number of legitimate reasons for not being in his own quarters. Kassianos waited for more of the picture to emerge.

Blue...Surely that was the abbot's robe. But it lay on the floor, crumpled and forgotten. Where was Menas, and why had he thrown aside his vestments?

Within moments, Kassianos had his answer. He felt a hot flush rise, not just to his cheeks, but to the very crown of his shaven head. He turned away from the image he had conjured up, yet still he saw body conjoined with body, saw that the man straining atop his eager partner was the abbot Menas.

Kassianos spoke another word, felt his sorcery dissolve. His face remained hot, now with fury rather than embarrassment. So Menas thought he could play him for a fool, eh? He imagined the abbot telling his paramour how he had fooled the fellow from the capital, and both of them laughing as they coupled. That thought only made the *nomophylax*'s rage burn hotter.

Then he caught himself wishing he had not turned his back quite so soon. He had not thought he could be any angrier, but found he was wrong. Before, his anger's flame had extended only to Menas and his still unknown lover. Now it reached out and burned him too.

KASSIANOS STAMPED grimly through the snow toward the monastery of the holy Tralitzes. He had left his mule behind on purpose, accepting the walk as the beginning of the penance he would pay for failing to root out the corruption in the monastery at the first try. His footprints left an emphatic trail behind him.

The pale, fitful sun gleamed off the gilded dome topping Phos' temple ahead. Kassianos turned aside before he was halfway there. Scanning the landscape ahead with a hunter's alertness, he spotted a blue-robe strolling toward a small wooden house several hundred yards to one side of the monastery. He was not sure whether hunter's instinct or sorcerer's told him it was Menas, but he knew.

The *nomophylax*'s breath burst from him in an outraged steaming cloud. "Phos grant us mercy! Not content with making a mockery of his

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vows, the sinner goes to show off his stamina," Kassianos exclaimed, though there was no one to hear him.

The abbot disappeared into the little house. Some men might have hesitated before disturbing the occupants of a trysting-place, but not Kassianos. He strode resolutely up to pound on the door, crying, "Menas, you are a disgrace to the robes you wear! Open at once!"

"Oh, dear," Menas said as Kassianos withered him with a glare. "You do take this seriously, don't you?" Now the abbot did not look amused, as he had so often back in his study. He looked frightened. So did the woman around whose shoulder he flung a protective arm.

The night before, her features slack with pleasure, she had seemed only a symbol of Menas' depravity. Now Kassianos had to confront her as a person. She was, he realized slowly, not a whore after all. Perhaps ten years younger than the abbot, she had an open, pretty face, and wore an embroidered linen blouse over a heavy wool skirt: peasant garb, not a courtesan's jewels and clinging silks.

Even without what his magic had let him witness, the way her hand reached up and clutched for Menas' would have told Kassianos everything he needed to know. It told him other things as well, things he had not thought to learn. It had never occurred to him that the cleric's illicit lover might feel all the same things for her man as another woman would for a proper partner.

Because the woman confused him, Kassianos swung his attention back to Menas. "Should I not take your perjury seriously?" he said heavily. "It only adds to the burden of your other sins."

"Perjury? I gave you my oath on Phos, holy sir, under the influence of your own drug, that I truly obey my vows. I do; I am not forsworn."

Kassianos' eyes narrowed. "No? You dare say that, in the company you keep? Hear once again, then, wretch, the seventh chapter of the holy Pakhomios' *Rule*. As you know, it is entitled 'On Women.' I hope you will trust my memory as I quote it: 'To ensure the preservation of the contemplative life, no brother shall be permitted to entertain women.' Standing where you are, with the person whose house this must be, how can you tell me you are no oathbreaker?"

To the amazement of the *nomophylax*, Menas' "companion" burst

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into laughter. Kassianos stared, thunderstruck. The woman said, "As you guessed, holy sir, this house was my husband's till he died six years ago, and belongs to me now. And so my dear Menas cannot entertain me here. *I* entertain *him*, or at least I hope I shall." She smiled smokily up at the worried abbot, stroked his bearded cheek.

Kassianos felt his jaw drop. He became aware that he had not blinked for some time, either. In fact, he realized his expression had to resemble nothing so much as a fresh-caught perch's. Pulling himself together with a distinct effort of will, he said slowly, "That is the most outlandish piece of casuistry I've heard in a lifetime of theological study."

He waited for his pompous wrath to burst forth in a great, furious shout. What came out instead was laughter. And once free, it would not let itself be restrained. Kassianos laughed until tears ran down his face into his beard, laughed until he doubled over. Now Menas and the woman were staring at him rather than the other way around.

Slowly the fit passed. Kassianos straightened, felt the sudden pain of a stitch in his side, ignored it. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve, then, more or less in control of himself, asked Menas, "Your monks are all, hmm, entertained themselves, and do no entertaining?"

"Of course, holy sir." The abbot sounded genuinely shocked. "Did we act otherwise, we would violate our vows."

"Hmm," Kassianos said again. "How long has this, ah, custom existed at the monastery of the holy Tralitzes?"

"Truly, holy sir, I do not know. Since before I entered as a novice, certainly, and before the novitiate of the oldest brothers there at that time, for they knew no different way."

"I see." And, curiously enough, Kassianos did. Develtos was just the sort of back-country town where a spurious practice like this could quietly come into being and then flourish for Phos only knew how long before anyone from the outside world noticed it was there.

Menas must have been thinking along with him, for he asked, "Holy sir, is it not the same everywhere?"

"Hardly." Kassianos' voice was dry. "In fact, I daresay you've found a loophole to appall the holy Pakhomios — and one untold generations of monks have prayed for in vain. I suppose I should congratulate you. Oh, my." He wiped his eyes again.

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"Perhaps you should, but I doubt you will," Menas' ladylove observed. "What *will* you do?"

The *nomophylax* eyed her with respect: no fool here. "Well, an inquisitor's court might fight its way through your logic," he said. Both the woman and Menas looked alarmed. Kassianos went on, "I doubt that will happen, though."

"What then?" Menas asked.

"First, I'd guess, a synod will convene in Videssos the city to revise the holy Pakhomios' *Rule* so no further, ah, misunderstandings of the seventh chapter will occur. That being accomplished, word of the corrected *Rule* will be sent to all monasteries in the Empire — including, I am comfortably certain, this one."

"And what will they do to us for having contravened their interpretation of the *Rule*?" Menas asked; Kassianos noted the slight emphasis the abbot put on "interpretation." He smiled to himself. In Menas' sandals, he would have tried to appear as virtuous as possible, too.

He answered, "While I cannot speak for the synod, I would expect it to decree no punishments for what is here a long-established, even if erroneous, custom. I would also expect, however, that an *epoptes* — a supervising monk — will come out from the capital to make certain the monastery of the holy Tralitzes diligently adheres to the seventh chapter as redefined."

Neither Menas nor his companion looked very happy at that. The *nomophylax* had not thought they would. He went on, "I mean what I say. If you continue to flout the *Rule* after it is changed to mean in letter what it does in spirit, you will not enjoy the consequences."

He had intended to impress them further with the seriousness of the situation. But the woman said, "Then we will just have to make the most of the time we have left." She shut the door in Kassianos' face.

He knew he should be angry. Instead, to his own discomfiture, he found himself admiring her. He realized with sudden regret that he had never learned her name. He raised his hand to knock on that closed door and ask. After a moment, he thought better of it.

Shaking his head, he turned and slowly started walking back to Develtos.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

COLLIDING CULTURES

CALCUTTA was a dry dust bowl simmering beneath a perpetual gray haze.

The drive from the airport recalled my last visit to India a decade before: endless shanties, rusting roofs, three-wheelers honking and milling in the chaotic roads, crowds stirring restlessly amid heaps of garbage and mysteriously common broken concrete.

The smells came out to greet me, classic Third World Tropical: spices, coal soot, cabbage, musty bare concrete, low-octane gasoline, dried sweat, urine, cheap perfume, unwashed frying pans, wood smoke. The aroma of history, and plenty of it.

Not an auspicious beginning for the International Conference on the Synthesis of Science and Religion, which was paying all my expenses. I began coughing within hours of my arrival on January 6, 1997. Every other day I had a massage and steam bath to feel clean again. I had thought myself seasoned by my three weeks in India in the mid-1980s, but this visit was different. A sense of a vast, brooding continent pervaded the streets.

It is easier to think like a scientist in the crisp West, with its air conditioning, ample lighting and orderly habits. The East seethes with age, musty atmospherics and a sense of how contingent anything is. Arrangements dissolve, distinctions blur. Western technology often seems an intrusion which will be digested while leaving the society unchanged. In the West, we often feel shaped by our technology, its pace driving us.

I tried to send an e-mail back to my secretary, going to the conference's sole computer. As I worked

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with the unfamiliar software I could look down into a courtyard where a cart pumped urine out of an underground vat. It collected there for harvesting; boiled, it yielded valuable chemical salts. The contrast between technologies was striking, and easy to smell.

Seeing a sleek Mercedes waiting at stoplights beside rickshaws drawn by men, and bullocks towing carts behind in the next lane, yields a sense of cultural vertigo. Technology inevitably gives birth to such dislocations when it collides with vast, distant cultures. In the West we tend to think of our technology as wedded to our time. That luxury the East cannot afford; centuries elbow each other for your attention.

Mature technology is discreet, simple, quiet, sinuously classical, even friendly. When it fits in, its use remains as obvious as a hammer, its effects as cheap as a floppy disk. Both it and its users have educated each other. New tech, though, strikes an oddly religious echo. The e-mail I used could only be accessed by one of the men who worked at the conference center, a devotee of the Hare Krishnas. Already he had become like a priest of the machine. The ordinary computer was central yet mysterious and the workers treated it with a hushed attention, like a sacred artifact of unknown powers.

Still, I had to remind myself that some of our Western abstractions are mere mannerisms, not essential. Why say 12:00 hours or 24:00 hours when noon and midnight work clearly?

Calcutta seemed an unlikely venue to discuss science, a purely western invention. We moved amid a world where religion seemed to shape the entire society. As with my 1980s visit, the longer I stayed the more alien the great subcontinent seemed. The veneer of the Raj, with its railroads and inventions bringing order, wore away. India has produced great scientists such as Bose and Chandrasekhar, but such names came from the tiny class at the top of a great population pyramid.

Coincidentally, English prime minister John Major was visiting Calcutta, and the anxious city managers cleared the streets of the homeless. Several hundred thousand live in downtown Calcutta; from my hotel room I could see them bed down for the night on the sidewalks. I got caught up in the Hawker's Union demonstration against this temporary deportation

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to the suburbs; it was a fairly orderly march jamming the entire downtown, thickly patrolled by police. The hawkers demanded the right to sell in the streets and dwell there as well, at least during weekdays.

Meanwhile, the conference leaned heavily toward the more New Age brand of science; to me, New Age should be pronounced to rhyme with "sewage." There were plenty of references to cosmological issues and interpretations of quantum mechanics. Often, the subtle issues of distinguishing between observers in wave mechanics leads to a kind of verbal segue into consciousness-as-primary thinking.

This can easily slide into a view that intelligence is the most important property in physical theories, and so Mind truly holds sway over Matter. Eastern religions like Mind over Matter, so there were many talks about connecting modern physics to age-old doctrines from the major Asian faiths, especially those in the Vedantic tradition. The Hare Krishnas are the newest emergent group from those based on the ancient sacred texts of Hinduism.

I reflected, though, that the physical sciences also strived for a goal which was, if not The Truth — for such was impossible, in the common sense — then at least the most complex yet elegant chimpanzee view of the world. And the gut feelings which guide scientists have an aesthetic base that does not differ fundamentally from the inchoate yearnings that emerged from many of the Conference speeches.

Even in arcane ornamentation, there are similarities. The Krishnas have an elaborate cosmology with vast, long ages of humanity and "emerging essences," an arcane history.

Compare with one current quantum field theory, which begins in eighteen dimensions, and then "rolls up" all but four, so that fourteen are unobservably small — perhaps a billion billion billion times more tiny than an atom. Then the universe proceeds more or less as Einstein's gravitational theory dictates.

In this picture we are living in a universe only apparently three-dimensional in space; infinitesimal but real dimensions lurk all about. Without such an early rolling up, any resulting universe could not support life, for there could be no stable atoms. Further, only in odd-numbered dimensions can waves propagate sharply, so three dimen-

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sions are favored over two. So we live not only in the best of all possible worlds, but the only possible one.

Such surrealistically bizarre images came from considering the form and symmetries of abstruse equations. In such chilly realms, beauty was often the only guide. The embarrassment of dimensions arose from seeking a mathematical clarity in eighteen dimensions, then hiding the extra dimensions from actually acting in our physical world.

To physicists, "natural" has come to mean how equations should look, their beauty. Aesthetic considerations are in the end a mask for chimpanzee preferences. Religions are constrained in the same basic way.

A long day of listening to quantum queasiness demands some time off. One evening we speakers at the Conference went to a posh estate tucked into the bleak cityscape. Through iron gates guarded by tough-looking men in suits, through a plush house festooned with tasteful art, into an ample yard where dozens of servants presented a wide-ranging Indian supper, some of it not recommended for the timid alimentary canal. Ancient dishes simmered in modern serving-table hardware, quite agreeably. No culture conflict here, I thought, digging in.

Our host was one of Bengal's leading industrialists, who said he supported the communist ("Left Front") government that had been in power for more than two decades. I found his continuing support difficult to believe, since the regime had driven Bengal into poverty, but the host felt that, after so long, the communists at least knew how things worked. I asked, "You mean, who to deal with?"

The well-dressed jute baron smiled. "Economics here is not markets, but personalities." He saw economics not as the working out of laws, but of wills. Going back to our hotel, the bare sidewalks were covered with sleeping bodies, some in muddy rags. Some were erecting new shacks, which the police would eventually sweep away. Nobody thought matters might someday be better. "India's path is different," I heard often. This seemed to mean that it had flatlined.

One of the Ayatollahs of Iran spoke at the Conference, giving little away except platitudes about how Islam was more scientifically forward-looking than the Judeo-

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Christian faiths. His evidence proceeded rather obscurely from Genesis. That evening I pointed out to him that in Genesis, God's first charge to Adam is to name the beasts — zoology, if not biology.

He blinked and said, "What would it take to make the United States friends with Iran again?"

The connection to Genesis was not obvious. Off the top of my head I said, "Remember that the U.S. doesn't forgive or forget enemies if it doesn't defeat them. Cuba, North Korea, North Vietnam...you're in that club." I wondered why he was asking me, a scientist.

"But there must be something we can do?"

"Cut out supporting terrorism and don't deploy weapons which can command the Persian Gulf, I'd say."

"The fundamentalists cause the terrorism."

Interesting, that he didn't try to deny Iran's role. "So?"

"The Jews are behind all the fundamentalists of Islam."

He seemed surprised when I laughed. It was an honest mistake; I had thought he was joking.

Despite modern communications, Iran lived not in the real world but in a culture of imagination. All the TV and e-mail the West could inject could not dispel illusions held fast in hard minds. Later I realized that nearly all his thinking revolved around conspiracies of some form, that history was indeed the result not of blunt economic forces and individual invention, but of collusions large and small.

After a week I began to see in a gut-deep way how much Indian society yearns to be free of the material world. Not surprising, considering how awful much of it is there, but the revulsion goes deeper, leading to a rejection of the body itself. Their myriad faiths all stress suppressing appetites; perhaps a shrewd move, in a place where satisfying them isn't on the menu. Here Marx seemed right, for once: religion keeps the swarming masses in the choked streets well laced with its opiate.

My instincts are utterly opposite. I grew up in a religious home, but early on learned a proper skepticism, the comfy doubt of frayed religiosity. The church has a polite glacial veneer that coats a flat disbelief in all things supernatural or superhuman. Plainly this is not enough for the increasing numbers in the advanced nations who turn to fundamentalism. They dislike

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the squashing of all morality into a pale, thin social ethic. No God, no order.

In the four-day Conference we got yet more quantum mechanics, which seems to have become a passport for fuzzy thinking based on the hard results of physics. Describing the world mathematically, I realized, sometimes gives a misleading air of authority. Too many scientists and philosophers thought that numbers were sitting out there in nature, waiting to be found, sorted, totted up. With enough docile computers, they imagined, scientists could relax while the flood of Number wrote their papers for them. The humanists' work was mostly matters of opinion. Poetry might be a perpetually moving target; science was not.

But "hard" facts can soften overnight, melt away under the pressure of newer hard facts. Interpretation shifts. Concepts once abandoned, like the corpuscular theory of light or the transmutability of the elements, have to be looked at again, centuries later. Science is far more provisional and tentative than many want to believe. It is really high adventure, precarious, the wildest of all explorations — not at all like cataloging or adding bricks to an already vast edifice.

Indeed, it was science's strangeness that drew me to it. Every era erects ornate explanations and trusts them enormously. But stiff science is harmful nonsense.

A speaker who had explicitly connected quantum effects and the religious experience came up to me at one of the coffee breaks. "Do you follow my line of argument?" He had a quick, ironic smile and pursed lips, a reserved gaze — the scholar's look.

"Too many leaps for me," I admitted.

"Perhaps in time these ideas will tunnel into your mind."

"Quantum tunneling?" I asked, but he did not think this was a joking matter.

The Conference took pains to be broad, admitting many points of view. I appeared on the program three times and quickly found that I was the Official Skeptic. I spoke on the moral/ethical problems soon to come from biotech, centering on the definition of what it means to be human, and found that the ethicists and religious figures there had done little thinking on these problems. Indeed, they were confounded by the present.

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Males exceed females among the children of India by several million already, due to sex detection in the womb plus ready abortion: a classic collision of the modern liberal agenda, with its seemingly penalty-free menu. A true feminist dilemma.

What happens when urban China and the western U.S. cities produce a five-percent difference between the sexes? And this sex difference arises from a decade-old technology; soon enough, parents will be able to edit out imbeciles or midgets, if they like. What boundary should society impose, or is all left to the parents?

Nobody had any answers. Nor did I, but I am not in that business. Scientists can sound the alarm; the big decisions should lie with those who lead society as a whole.

The more I learned of one of the Conference sponsors, the Hare Krishnas, the more odd they seemed. Only in a quarter of their lives could their devotees have sex, and then only once a month, strictly for reproduction. Otherwise, they were to avoid meat, alcohol, caffeine, TV, movies, even non-Krishna books; a mental claustrophobia. Of the four stages of life (Youth, Housekeeping, Retirement, Renunciation) the latter two were the most valued, for they withdrew more from the world.

These ideas emerged from the Indian culture itself, and were not mere tacked-on measures. The Krishnas are basically a chanting cult, recruiting those adept at autohypnosis. Their rules constrain their followers and fuel their expansion. Vedantic culture is inhospitable to our modern scientific worldview; followers regularly assured me that humans had been around for hundreds of millions of years, contrary to the "misleading" fossil evidence.

Indeed, their cosmology has a sense of futility about it. One must go through reincarnation, I was told, many thousands of times before reaching enlightenment. Nobody I met was going to get nirvana in the next life, by any means. With goals so far away, a listlessness sets in.

If the Hare Krishnas gain more power as India subsides into a lethargic wreck, they will become important. I decided to take a look at one of their major installations.

On the long four-hour journey from Calcutta to Mayapur, a religious retreat, our driver carefully explained that if he should strike any of the many bicyclists, he would have to drive speedily away, and

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would we please not shout at him for doing so.

The reason was simple. Villagers commonly dragged drivers from cars that hurt locals, no matter who might be at fault, and typically beat them to death. They also beat the passengers, robbed them and stole the car.

So we should understand and not criticize if this should befall us on this trip. This little speech focused my uneasy attention on the roadway, and three times we came very close to scattering a bicyclist from our path, but at the last instant the driver swerved away. I rode most of the way with held breath.

Along the way we stopped for a drink at a shack roofed in tin with no walls. A man stirred a soup over a fire and a few men sat at a table drinking Coke. Why was this a hotel? Then I saw the cane racks set out on the roadside, where lorry drivers could sleep within a few yards of the traffic. No walls, no rooms. The sense of a hotel setting a boundary between yourself and the world was gone, a fleeting western concept.

Walking into the dusk, I found that beyond the road lay rice paddies as far as the eye could see, no stands of trees more than a few yards wide. Figures labored over them into the night. The natural world had vanished, replaced by incessant agriculture, a solely human landscape. Much of India is the same flattened spectacle, a stage for the endlessly cyclic Vedantic drama of birth and death and around again.

At the Hare Krishna compound I ate excellent vegetarian food, watched their pre-dawn dancing worship, and toured the temples and schools. The Vedantic reverence for all life extends famously to cows; here they had airy stables. Concrete chutes carry their dung into an underground dome, where it decays and methane collects above it. The concrete blister poked above the ground next to the school's kitchen. From the dome's pressure trap they pipe methane directly into the stoves and ovens upon which the cooks prepare lunch. The gas burns cleanly, blue and hot. A touch of Western engineering plus a plentiful resource.

How clean was it? I asked. Very, they said.

This is certainly a better solution than the traditional, which we saw along many plaster walls and the sides of houses: dung pancakes shaped by hand and stuck up to dry.

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When they are ripe they fall off, are collected and stacked in ricks to dry further. Eventually they are burned in the huts for heat and cooking fuel, the smoke inhaled by the whole family.

Among the neatly arranged, traditional, thatch-roofed classrooms I saw two women spreading a brown layer on the dusty paths. One mixed cow dung in a bucket of water and the other smoothed it everywhere with a broom.

Why? Ancient Vedantic lore holds that cow waste is medicinal. It sanitizes the area, my guide said; much cheaper than Western products.

Inside one of the classrooms they were using computers. The reputation of the Hare Krishna compound was exceptional, and indeed, it had a directed, orderly efficiency that reminded me of well run private (but not public) schools in the U.S.A. Most of the compound is run by Americans, who have struck an odd and occasionally unsettling balance between cultures.

Conferences never end with firm conclusions. This one had uncovered the expected oppositions between views, but without finding new pathways to reconcile them. No surprise. I was glad to escape Calcutta's claustrophobic atmosphere, winging off for an overnight in Bombay, speaking at the opening of a new Institute for the Study of Consciousness.

Bombay is the richest, biggest city in India, predicted to become the world's largest by 2020. The government has changed the city's name to Mumbai but it isn't sticking, and the inhabitants have no time to care; about half of them are homeless, and over a third of the houses do not have safe drinking water. From an air-cushion water bus, sipping drinks with umbrellas in them, you can watch swarms of the poor thronging the beaches. The trash service picks up bodies dead of starvation, hauling them away, past some of the city's 150 diet clinics.

Charles Townes, a retired but remarkably active University of California professor, had been at the meeting and the compound. In Bombay we sat together on the platform and wondered what one could say about trying to study the bewildering problem of consciousness by blending both scientific and Vedantic ideas. Townes invented the maser, whose central idea led quickly to the laser, and won a Nobel for it. He said that he had always had an interest in the interface of

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the scientific worldview and others. So far, he noted, not much had come of it in his lifetime. Science steamrollered on and other views seemed to have little impact on the world.

I made a few remarks on how the history of science, and my experience of it, shows that our most valuable instrument is a ready recognition of what we do not know, and our most valuable attitude is the willingness to question what we think we do. Certainly India had underlined that; I kept colliding with ideas quite foreign and unforgettable.

I duly showed up for my flight to Sri Lanka, only to find that it did not exist. How could the airline issue a ticket for a non-flight? Shrugs; "clerk error." But why did they then confirm the flight only three days before? "Another clerking error, sir." A mysterious smile; of Conradian darkness?

Waiting for the next day's flight, I watched Hare Krishna devotees in the temple next door as they ran their robot play, featuring their guru. With recordings of his voice, the guru-robot moved through little playlets, dispensing wisdom and even meeting a robot Lord Krishna.

The lifelike head and arm movements seemed unlikely to convince anyone of holy mysteries, but I found fascinating a parallel vision on the laptop at my elbow. In reasonable definition and color Terminator 2's robots from the future slugged it out, running from the CD-ROM drive. The ritual faith of one set exactly countered the existentialist void of the other, leaving me suspended in a techno-oblivion amid the Third World miasma of Bombay.

Arthur Clarke's driver found me readily at the airport. He simply held up the hardcover jacket of the book we did together, *Beyond the Fall of Night*, a language-independent signal.

When I reached Arthur's home in Colombo, Sri Lanka seemed a paradise compared with India. Arthur was as quick and merry as always, centered in his high-tech web, taking calls and e-mail and faxes from the whole linked globe. I took a photo of him playing the Rama game derived from his novel, on a laptop computer. The war of men and alien lifeforms was a useful distraction from the knowledge that a real civil war was raging right outside; I had to pass through several army checkpoints to get around the city.

When he had to rest in the

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afternoons he let me have his red Mercedes and driver to visit the Arthur Clarke University, allied with the larger university some miles away. Newly built, it concentrates on practical training in electronics appropriate for the region, particularly circuits that manage appliances during the nearly daily blackouts and brownouts of an infrastructure strained to supply adequate power.

Such hardnosed applications parallel Arthur's early technological career, when he worked on radar and then envisioned communications satellites linking the planet. Even so, his fiction has often been techno-mystical, with a touch of longing for the same release from the body. Arthur has lived in Colombo since the middle 1950s, yet has never lost his faith that in expanding humanity's knowledge and capabilities lies the secret to our destiny.

Dwelling in a culture which abhors the flesh, he nonetheless sings of extending the human reach to the stars. I remembered the night sky over a temple where I had stayed in Mayapur, sharp and clear, which one of the devotees described as "the gods watching."

This uncanny sense occurred many times, the sense that in India one meets both past and future. If we continue to swell our numbers and despoil our world, we could make all the Earth like this. Something in me rebelled at the thought.

The ancient consolations would emerge: the Krishnas reminded me of a chimpanzee troop, chanting and dancing as solace. To that devotee, the stars were unattainable entities, serenely passing judgment on our failings.

To Arthur, they are a goal. The fast-moving dots of light are planets, after all. Our robots — spindly spiders, not imitation gurus — have already been there, reconnoitering. In time we could climb to them and find ourselves in the realization of our own ever-expanding horizons. Yet beside this sense of opening would always run the strains of far antiquity, heartfelt longings and seething hates alike, the consolations of a species still finding its way.

We discussed the coming of Hale-Bopp, a promisingly bright comet. While writing this memoir, it has grown enormously. As well, thirty-nine cultists have killed themselves, hoping to be picked up by a spaceship following the comet. The dark side of religion haunts us still, wearing the trappings of pop-sf with its "sci-fi" simplicities.

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Clarke's attitude, living immersed in a culture that struggles to embrace new and old, came as a breath of clean air in the tropical sun. Leaving Sri Lanka, I exhaled with pleasure. Out with the coal soot, cabbage, musty bare concrete. I banished the stinging dust and oily fumes of Calcutta from my lungs, like ancient, spoiled ideas.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717.

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John Morressy retired from teaching at the end of 1995 and is catching up on lots of reading now, not to mention his own writing. His most recent novel is The Juggler *and we can expect new stories of the magician Kedrigern to grace these pages soon. Here, however, we have a very different sort of story, a tale of a space worker who finds that time plays tricks on everybody, and wonders if perhaps the same might be said of politicians.*

Rimrunner's Home

By John Morressy

RIMRUNNER SIX TOUCHED down softly as a snowflake on a cat's back. The lock-jockeys and groundbugs took less than a minute to scramble back to cover, then the port swung out and Vanderhorst started down the ramp. Lights were everywhere. Off to his left, a picket ship in a trim new design was poised on her ring, vehicles darting about in her shadow like ants around a fencepost. Vanderhorst liked the look of her, but he could spare the ship no more than a glance. All his attention was on getting down the ramp and into POP Headquarters without stumbling. Downside gravity had him feeling like a drunken elephant on greased glass. It made no difference to him that there was no one to see him fall.

That was the standing rule: no one sees a rimrunner until he's been to POP for debriefing. Other rules changed, but that one appeared to have remained.

Vanderhorst hated debriefings. They were foolish and unnecessary and long. POP ground control had monitored and recorded every instant from liftoff to lock-in, but they wanted a verbal account, even though

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Vanderhorst had nothing to report from this trip but his dreams.

He wondered if anyone in POP actually expected a human to spot something the instruments had missed. Each time back, heading for debriefing, Vanderhorst fantasized about reporting something twice the size of the big rock of '06 heading straight for Washington. But he could not hope to get away with a trick like that. The instruments knew better. Even joking about it could cost his job, and he was not ready to give up rimrunning.

Doors loomed before him bearing the interlaced silver rings of the Perimeter Orbiting Patrol. He walked on without pausing and they purred apart to admit him. He passed through three more sets of doors and arrived at last in the debriefing room. Steadier on his feet now, but tired by the walk, he settled heavily in the oversized soft chair that awaited.

The room was dull white, illuminated in such a way as to minimize the sensation of enclosure. Vanderhorst breathed deeply and allowed himself to relax a little.

When the debriefer entered, Vanderhorst raised a hand in greeting and remained seated. He studied the newcomer. The man looked like the father of someone he knew.

"Remember me, Van?"

He had to think for a moment. "Bob Watts?"

"That's right. Last time you saw me, I wasn't even showing a gray hair."

"It's only twenty-one months ago for me. How long have I been out Earthtime?"

"Nineteen years, five months, twenty-four days. Your health reads perfect, Van. You can skip the medics, if you like."

"I'll skip them."

"We have a new model picket ship. She's on North Ring Four."

"I had a quick look at her."

"She's a beauty, Van. Roomier than Six, and about one-third Earth gravity shipboard."

"Why the extra room? Do I toss in my sleep?"

"Wait till you see, Van. She's got a new type of — "

"Hold all that," Vanderhorst broke in. "Right now, I want to get this over with and see what the world looks like this time around."

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Watts raised a hand. "Anything you say, Van. Unless you have something unusual to report, you can go direct to Reacculturation."

"No formal debriefing?"

"Not for the last fourteen years. No point to them."

"I told the smart boys that sixty years ago," Vanderhorst said. "Any other changes I should know about?"

"Nothing major. Reacculturation can tell you better than I can."

"You tell me. If I've come back to trouble, I want to know."

"Nothing serious, Van. You've seen it all before. POP isn't the people's favorite these days, that's all."

"Why not? Did something get by?"

"Nothing gets by POP. It's the old problems: money and politics. That new model cost ninety-four billion. It's one of four. Some people say that's too expensive."

"Asteroid hits are expensive, too," Vanderhorst said. "The one in '06 cost a couple of trillion, and that one landed in the ocean. What if the next one knocks California into the Pacific?"

"That's what we tell them, Van. But '06 was eighty years ago for downsiders. No one remembers it."

"Do they remember the ones we took out before they hit?"

Watts shook his head. "Nobody remembers what didn't happen, Van."

"So now there's talk of cutting the program. Is that it?"

"Not from anyone who matters."

"Sometimes you don't know who matters until it's too late."

"POP has friends, Van. You picked up a high-probable on this run, and we'll use that against the jokers who tell people that the odds against another big hit are a million to one. The program is safe."

Vanderhorst pushed himself up out of the chair. For an instant he was unsteady. Watts started to assist him, but checked himself.

"I'm doing just fine, Bob," Vanderhorst said. "Is Reacculturation in the same place as before?"

Watts nodded. "Second door on the left. Good to have you back, Van."

This was the best debriefing yet. Watts had kept it short and spoken straight. Vanderhorst detested the assault of carefully researched obsolete terms that some POP staffers memorized to put rimrunners at their ease.

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The artificial speech was nothing more than a buffer, placing the staffers at a safe remove from real contact.

Was it insensitivity, he wondered, or ignorance? Was it fear? Perhaps none of the downsiders in POP really wanted to know how it felt to be out there alone, ringing the solar system at half of lightspeed on a sixty-billion-mile circuit; or what it was like to come back to new words, new ideas, a new society on each return and never know what the reception was going to be.

Cutback talk was nothing new. On Vanderhorst's first return, there had been riots and an attack on the launch complex, but all that frenzy had passed with recovery from the depression of 2028. When he came back for the second time, in '48, all was calm. The last time back, in '67, rimrunners were folk heroes. He had been on the hollies every night for two weeks running. All three major parties had approached him to stand for office in the '68 elections.

If he had stayed downside that last time, he would now be almost as old as Watts. No, correct that. He would look almost as old. In fact he would be much older. That was the unsettling part, that sight of an old acquaintance aged a score of years to his two. It made all the differences manifest and undeniable. Rimrunners cheated time and clocks and calendars, those universal tyrants: that was what people thought, and why everyone envied them, and some resented them, and a few hated them, despite the surface show of admiration. But the price of those stolen years was high, and few could pay it. One rimrunner out of a hundred did a second circuit. So far, only Vanderhorst had returned for a third and a fourth.

Even in the stasis tank, isolation was a palpable presence. Careful screening, training, and conditioning all helped make it more bearable, but it was always there, enclosing a man like his own skin. It did things to people.

When he passed through the last door, Vanderhorst stopped and looked around in mild surprise. Reacculturation had a different look. The impersonal office he recalled from his last visit had been turned into a comfortable homelike setting of the kind he had longed for in childhood. Windows admitting sunlight and fresh air, curtains blowing in a gentle breeze, doors all standing ajar; nothing here to confine him. A young

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couple, slim and clean-featured, both of them smiling in welcome, rose from chairs to greet him.

"Welcome back, Captain Vanderhorst. It's an honor to have you here," the man said, extending a hand. "I'm Korry Long."

"I'm Jemma Tulio," the woman said.

"Jemma and I are a registered couple. We're under a two-year option agreement," Korry said. "I daresay that doesn't mean much to you, Captain."

"Not a thing."

Jemma took Vanderhorst's hand and led him to a chair. "There's been considerable change in the structuring of social relations. That's probably the most significant alteration in the cultural pattern since your departure, so we thought we'd begin your reacculturation with that aspect."

The chair was set out from a corner, with plenty of space before and on both sides. Vanderhorst seated himself gingerly. "Is this reacculturation? No more talkdowns? No cramming?"

"This is the talkdown. Sleep-cram will be administered only when you feel ready," she said.

"So we just sit here and chat?"

"Exactly. We find that it facilitates reintegration."

"Choppy down with me, runklers," Vanderhorst said, folding his hands behind his head. When they both turned vague, cautious smiles on him, he said, "Sorry. That's from before your time. I thought you'd have the old expressions down pat."

"We avoid conscious anachronisms now, Captain," Korry said.

"Call me Van. And tell me more about social relations."

"There's been a strong resurgence of traditional attitudes in the last fifteen years. Apparently things were quite uninhibited when you were home last."

"You make it sound as if I've been away to camp."

"I hope we haven't offended — "

"Never mind. Yes, things were uninhibited," Vanderhorst said, smiling faintly, remembering the days of anything anyone wanted, anywhere, anytime, with anyone at all, until there was nothing left to want. The 2060s had been prosperous years, and people had lived them to the burnt-out end.

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"So we've heard. It's different now."

"I expected something like that. How different are they?"

Jemma responded. "Many things that were acceptable during your last stay downside are now under social sanction."

Her explanation was unnecessary. The information was there for Vanderhorst to see. Jemma was pretty, and doing her best to conceal it. Makeup that gave her a sallow coloration, close-cropped hair, a dingy sack of a dress that concealed her figure: here were the signs that he had come back to leaner times. He recalled the depression years of his first return. No wonder the people are screaming about POP's budget, he thought. They don't want rimrunners, they want bread and circuses and sex. It's all they ever wanted.

"What's legal these days?" he asked.

"The government hasn't made life impossible, Van," Korry began with a show of joviality. "Times may be less free-wheeling, but — "

"Stop hedging. I've just spent nearly two years in space. I may want company once I've settled in, and I don't want to be arrested for saying 'Hello' to a woman."

Jemma laid her hand on his. "The government recognizes special circumstances, Van."

Vanderhorst looked from one to the other, then laughed. They did not join in. Still grinning, he said, "The new morality sounds like old-fashioned scodding around, only with government approval."

Jemma looked uncomfortable, "It's a very special privilege, Van."

He raised a conciliatory hand. "I'll be grateful. And serious. Tell me more."

They went on, speaking in turn, a well-rehearsed routine, and Vanderhorst listened with a solemn look on his sharp features. He nodded weightily from time to time to demonstrate attention, but his mind was only half on their words. They had little to teach him.

Vanderhorst had passed his youth in the shrill and angry years that bracketed the millennium, a time when half the world looked to the turn of the century as an end and the other half saw it as a beginning. Those who proclaimed Armageddon felt that their prophecy was fulfilled, albeit belatedly, when in 2006 a giant meteorite plunged into the Indian Ocean.

For Vanderhorst, the calamity meant deliverance. Within months the

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Perimeter Orbiting Patrol had been organized. Staffed and supported by most of the nations of the world, its mission was to serve as first line of defense: to detect and destroy any incoming object that threatened Earth or the lunar colonies. Its budget was unlimited.

Volunteers were many; the qualified were very few. For that fortunate handful, POP offered the honor of being a "defender of the farthest frontier," as its promoters said. It also promised an extended lifespan and a chance to amass enormous wealth. To Vanderhorst, it afforded escape from the daily round of hardship and indignity compounded by growing hatred for the generations that had left their children a drained and dirty world to live on. He knew that regeneration would come, but no one then alive could hope to see it — except by cheating time.

POP offered the cheater. In return, it required two years of one's life, nearly twenty of objective time, spent farther out in space than any human had ever ventured; alone, encapsulated, beyond all hope of help from Earth, beyond all contact with one's native world.

Vanderhorst considered it a fair exchange. An only child, orphaned while young, instinctively mistrustful of groups and more independent than was socially permissible, he seemed the ideal rimrunner: a loner by nature and by choice. In 2008, he became the sixth to lift off.

He returned to Earth in 2028 with vague memories of smothering blackness; of hideous nightmares, of helplessness crushing him like a weight. Nothing was clear in his memory but the sensation of being utterly alone. He vowed never to go up again.

After three months downside, he reconsidered his vow. Four more trips and he could retire, an immensely rich man still physically in his thirties, though Earth calculations would make him more than a century and a quarter old. He debated, weighed the alternatives, changed his mind half a dozen times, and then went up again.

"Are you listening, Van?" Jemma's voice broke into his reverie.

"It sounds as if I can be arrested for doing anything that looks like I might enjoy it."

"No one's arrested anymore, Van. Offenders are offered social assistance."

"Offered? Then that means I can turn it down, doesn't it?" They looked at him, faces bland as wax. "All right, forget that remark. Just run

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a summary of behavior expectations into my cram. It's simpler that way," he said, yawning. "Put the update on POP status with government and public on the cram, too. I want all that clear in my mind by morning."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk any longer? Personal contact is an important part of reacculturation," Korry said.

"So is sleep. I've been awake for most of the last three days. And I haven't weighed a hundred kilos for a long time."

"If you'd like companionship, Van, we're authorized..." Jemma smiled and let her voice trail into silence.

"Won't I need a permit?" Vanderhorst said, rising. "Thanks for the kind offer, but I'll take care of my personal relations all by myself."

He left them with a definite feeling that there were a great many things about the world of 2087 that he was not going to like.

HE AWOKE TO BRIGHT SUNLIGHT, his head bursting with information. The integration of old and new was, as always, a confusing process. He felt blurry and out of focus. Shutting his eyes tightly, he turned to the darker wall. After a time, he rolled over on his back and propped himself on his elbows. He yawned luxuriously and looked over the room. Like the Reacculturation Office, it was a turn of the century setting. They were bringing him down gently this time.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and rose cautiously. He felt more at ease with normal gravity now than he had upon landing.

The apartment had a shower with a strong flow. The water was clear and free of the stale reek of shipboard water. As he dried in the heat bay, soft notes announced a call. He switched on the speaker.

"Did you enjoy the shower, Van? We tried to get one like the ones you had before you went up."

"You don't have to recreate the world of my youth for me, Jemma. I can adjust. I've done it before."

"We're only trying to make things as easy as we can."

"How about just letting me alone? I'm as updated as I want to be."

"You have press conferences today."

"They're never a problem. All I do is read the script POP has written for me."

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"Tomorrow you meet with your financial advisors. It may take some time. Your investments have grown complicated over the years."

"Anything else?"

"There's a party."

"If I want a party, I'll throw my own."

"This is important, Van, for you and for the program. Government people will be there. They're interested in meeting you."

"I'm not interested in meeting them."

"Please, Van. It's really important." When he did not respond, Jemma went on, "Other people will be there, too. You'll enjoy it. And after that you'll be on leave. No more interruptions."

The formal attire of this time was simple in cut and subdued in color. In full dress uniform, Vanderhorst was the instantaneous center of attention when he, Jemma, and Korry entered.

"That's Senator Dalton. She's Chairman of the Space Ops Committee," Korry said.

Vanderhorst followed Korry's sightline and saw a tall, slim woman with silver hair standing with a younger man and a woman. As soon as Dalton noticed them she raised a hand in greeting. Korry steered Vanderhorst toward the threesome.

"It's good of you to come, Captain Vanderhorst," Dalton said. "This is Dorée and Jake Fosset. Jake is my senior advisor. I must say, we're all proud of the rimrunners. You're brave people doing a hard, lonely job."

"We're paid for it."

"There's more to it than the pay, Captain. I'm sure of that."

"I think mostly about the pay," Vanderhorst said, edging around so that his back was to the window. He glanced at Korry, who appeared ready to burst into tears. Jemma forced a smile.

Dalton said, "You're an honest man, Captain. Whatever POP offered, you'd never get me to circle the solar system for a twenty-year hitch."

"It doesn't feel like twenty. Doesn't feel like much of anything, to tell the truth."

"You spend most of your time sleeping, isn't that right? There are people who accuse us in Washington of doing much the same."

"I get my rest, Senator."

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"From what I've read, you were born a century ago. You certainly don't look a century old."

Vanderhorst emptied his glass. "I may in the morning."

Dalton burst into laughter. "You say exactly what you think, Captain. I admire that."

"Good," Vanderhorst said. His expression did not change. He felt the crowd pressing in on him, and stepped back to distance himself. His jaw was set tight.

"Tell me, Captain, is it difficult out there?" Dorée Fosset asked.

"Is what difficult?"

"The work. The mission."

"Easiest job I ever had. The machines do all the work. Even the thinking."

"I didn't mean difficult in that sense. I was thinking of the isolation. It must be terrible. All that time, and so far from home. Confined in a small space, no outlet...." Dorée looked at him innocently and made a vague gesture with her hand.

Vanderhorst looked her up and down slowly, appraisingly, and said nothing. The silence drew to an uncomfortable length. Korry leaned forward and said, "Van has four circuits to his credit. He knows how — "

"Mostly, you're asleep," Vanderhorst broke in. His voice was bland, almost clinical, as if he were lecturing to an academy. "It's bad when you're awakened, because that means there's trouble. You hope it's not something that's sent you shooting out into the universe with the sleep tank out of commission. That's big trouble. You hope it's something you can fix pretty damned fast. Once you're awake, you can't wait to go back in the tank, because you don't like what you're thinking. You curse yourself for being fool enough to go up, and you begin to hate the people who sent you. You think of letting a big one slip by and give them a good scare. Then you hate yourself for thinking that way, and wonder if you're going crazy. But you make the repairs and get back into the tank and hope for sweet dreams. That's how the time passes."

Jake Fosset asked, "Why send people out at all?"

"Can't trust the machines."

"Then why use machines?"

"Can't trust people, either. You need both."

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"Do we, really? A lot of people question the rimrunner program. From what you say, they may have a point," Fosset said.

Long periods of isolation had sharpened Vanderhorst's receptiveness to unspoken communication; he sometimes felt that he could read people as easily as he read an instrument screen. Fosset was not very subtly probing for reactions while his wife assisted and his boss observed. Vanderhorst had encountered their types in every generation.

"And what's their point?" Vanderhorst asked.

"POP is a costly program, and costs keep rising. We have no way of knowing whether or not it's effective. A lot of people think there may be a better way of protecting ourselves."

"What do they suggest?"

"Nothing specific. It's all very tentative, you understand. It may turn out that rimrunners are the best solution."

Vanderhorst turned to Dalton. "Has anything hit Earth since '06?"

"Nothing big enough to frighten anyone, Captain."

"Then maybe we're effective."

"Are you saying that the rimrunners deserve credit for the absence of asteroid strikes?" Fosset said. "Well, really, Captain, I find that — "

"Who the hell else can claim credit? You? I didn't see anybody else out there, Fosset. Not you, not the Senator, not anybody. I was alone, protecting your ass."

Vanderhorst's eyes remained on Fosset. Others glanced at them, but kept a safe distance. Fosset backed away and Dalton said mildly, "Jake's not trying to deny rimrunners the recognition and gratitude they've earned, Captain. He's only making the reasonable point that we can't be absolutely certain that our safety is the direct result of your efforts."

"So all you want is absolute certainty, and you'll be satisfied."

"Obviously that's impossible."

"It always was, and everybody knows it. POP is cheap insurance, Senator, nothing more. You stake a few billion a year against the chance of losing a thousand times as much."

"It's rather more than a few billion."

"Even if we never spotted anything bigger than a snowball, we pay our way ten times over."

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"Very possibly. I must point out, though, that the country is currently experiencing economic difficulties," Dalton said.

"Maybe that's because lobies like this one are yapping about cutting the only government program that does what it's supposed to do."

"I confess I've never looked at it that way," Dalton said. Vanderhorst felt a nudge in his ribs and turned to see Korry, looking agonized, close at his side. "It's unfair for me to monopolize the guest of honor. We'll talk again, Captain," Dalton said, moving off smoothly, the Fossets in her wake.

When they were out of earshot, Jemma said in a low, furious voice, "Are you trying to destroy the program?"

"You wanted me to talk to Dalton. I talked."

"Yes, but the way you talked...."

"I don't like her. Or her lapdog. They're posturing frauds. If anyone in any government dared to cut the program and an asteroid the size of a golfball landed in the middle of the Gobi Desert, they'd be lynched. They know it, you know it, I know it. But they play at being important and I hate them for it."

"Van, you mustn't — "

"I told you I'm not good at this."

"What was it you called Fosset?" Korry asked.

"Lobie. You called him a lobie. What's that?" Jemma demanded.

"Before your time. Forget it."

She frowned and looked at Korry. He raised his brows and shook his head. Abruptly, Jemma's eyes widened. She looked at Vanderhorst in horror and said, "That's what they used to call lobotomized social offenders! And the kids who imitated them, the lobie gangs. Vandals and criminals!"

"It fits Fosset. Maybe Dalton, too. Now let's drop it. I've done my part and I want a drink." He walked away and left them standing by themselves.

The lodge at Silverhill offered a prospect that Vanderhorst had dreamed of as he rode beyond the farthest orbit of the solar system. Soft hills, flower-carpeted, fell away to a crystal lake. Beyond them rose the mountains, green-skirted and crowned in white. The skies were clean. No

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cities, no houses, no other works of man were to be seen. This was the Earth he dreamed of in the black void beyond Pluto, the planet he feared for and considered worth the risk of his life and his sanity.

Popular belief had downside rimrunners abandoning themselves to debauchery; and indeed, while aloft Vanderhorst sometimes spun lurid fantasies of his coming Earthtime. But on his last two returns, he found that what he wanted most was time to sit back and look, to walk without boundaries and breathe unrecycled air. Thanks to eighty years' accumulated wealth, he could patronize one of the few unspoiled areas in North America.

Vanderhorst had learned of Silverhill on his last return, and found that it offered a better method of reacculturation than POP had yet devised. Here one could see others and yet remain apart. Companionship could be had when it was desired and endured no longer than it pleased.

Open spaces brimming with the sounds and smells of life drew Vanderhorst on long solitary walks. He sat for hours on a hillside, or under a tree, his back against the rough bark, absorbing his surroundings. One entire morning he passed listening to birdsong, and once he glimpsed a hawk. He spent his days out of doors regardless of the weather. The warmth of sun or the cool touch of rain on his upturned face were equally welcome. The nightly return of familiar stars was assurance.

He dined elaborately with a companion engaged for the evening. There was no talk of social relations or government approval. Sometimes he chose to end the day alone.

Silverhill offered an oversized circumferential hollie unit for each lodge. The hollies had made great advances since his last time downside, and Vanderhorst found the sensation fascinating. Not long before, he had been wrapped in the vast emptiness of the fringes of interstellar space. Now he could immerse himself in a simulacrum of life. At the center of a swarm of humans that appeared as real as himself, he could participate in the intrigues and assignations of the mighty, be a witness to famous events, a partner to history and romance; he could enjoy any experience he could conceive. And all came and went at his will, for the touching of a button.

One crisp and cloudless night he returned to his lodge and found the message light flashing. His first reaction was surprise, which turned

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almost at once to anger. He pressed the transmit plate. A smiling face appeared on the small screen.

"My message signal is on. Is it a mistake?"

"No, sir. The message was received at 21:27."

"Who was it?"

"The caller left no name, sir. It was voice only, no visual."

"Are you sure it was for me?"

"It was for the gentleman in Frostwood Lodge, sir. The caller left a number for you to call."

"I don't want any messages. Don't connect anybody, understand?"

"You will not be disturbed, sir."

Vanderhorst was at Silverhill under a carefully maintained false identity, using a supposedly untraceable credit line. Damn POP and their meddling, he thought. I'm done with them until briefing time, and I want their claws out of my hide. He wondered whether Watts had called, or Korry, or Jemma, or some officious underling running errands for his chief; and he wondered why there had been only a call, and no one had come bursting in on him, and how long it would be before they dared that.

After a simple dinner, he settled in the middle of the hollie and sampled the offerings. For lack of anything more interesting, he selected "Evening on the Town (Comedy)."

A crowded room phased into existence around him, filled with the low murmur of muted conversations, the muffled clink and clatter of dining and drinking, occasional distant laughter, unobtrusive music in the background. A light blazed some five meters ahead and a young man in a gaudy cloak, leaning heavily on a long staff, limped into sight.

From his updating, Vanderhorst recognized the man as an eccentric, one of the popular entertainers of the period. Eccentrics were story-tellers, descendants of the old standup comics and flatscreeners. By convention, they all affected a minor physical disability and pretended to great earnestness in their delivery.

"Here's the latest from the colonies," the limping man said, clasping both hands around his staff and thrusting his head forward. "Sixty-three lunies have kidnapped the Vice President of Terralune Gravitronics. One did the actual kidnapping. The other sixty-two are still trying to write the ransom note."

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Laughter rose around Vanderhorst. He did not join in. The eccentric brandished his staff and the laughter died.

"The lunies complain that everything we send up costs too much. They say we're getting rich off them down here," he said, looking about with a challenging glare. "What do they expect? Every tube of soap has to come with an instruction program."

The laughter began again. Vanderhorst cut it short with a jab of his finger. The crowd vanished, and he was alone in the circular room, in silence and faint light.

He admired the lunar colonists and did not enjoy jokes that belittled them. The worst things never change, he reflected. The staybehinds send others out to do their sweatwork and watch over their cozy world, and begrudge them so much as a "Thanks." His father had told him how the staybehinds had treated veterans of his own long-forgotten war. It was no different then. But lunies and rimrunners had a deadlier enemy, and no hope of victory. Space always won in the end. Downsiders could not understand them, so they derided them.

Vanderhorst's mood grew sour. The humor of this age angered him. He had heard those jokes before; they were undying, and he despised those who laughed at mockery of better men and women. In the sixties the butt was the shackers, the swarms of poor that encircled every urban complex. Shackers were fair game for scorn: the methmen who recycled human waste were called "Shackie chefs" by urbanites whose chief concern in the sanctuary of their towers was overeating. The targets back in the forties were the lobies. Before that, there were other out-of-favor groups.

But never before had these jokes been public fare. He wondered what the lunar settlers had done — or achieved — to turn downsiders so openly against them. His sleep-cram had not been helpful on that subject. One day, he thought, it will be rimrunners.

Two days later, Senator Dalton came to Silverhill. She was seated on the deck of Frostwood Lodge when Vanderhorst returned at dusk from a day of solitary walking.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Vanderhorst demanded.

"I had to see you, Captain."

"I don't want to see anybody."

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"Please, Captain. I have an important matter to discuss with you."

"You tried to reach me the other night, didn't you?"

"Yes. I've tried several times since then. They refused to put me through, so I came myself. It's important."

"Not to me."

"To you and to the program. Give me a few minutes. If I can't persuade you to listen on, I'll leave."

Vanderhorst hesitated for a moment, frowning. "All right. We'll talk out here. What do you want?"

"To hear about POP's work from someone who actually does it."

"I told you the other night. The machines do the work. I'm along in case they need a kick. On four runs I've spent a total of fewer than a hundred hours awake."

"How do you perceive the rimrunners' mission?"

"We're the forward observers. We register incoming objects above a given mass, compute their trajectories, and send the data in to the Solomons. If the Solomons decide that an object is a danger to Earth or the colonies, they alert the Paladins. The Paladins take appropriate action. The system works. Forty-seven alerts and twenty-two takeouts since POP began."

"Was each of those takeouts a serious threat?"

"The Solomons thought so. I won't argue."

Dalton was silent for a time, then she said, "The Solomons and Paladins are unmanned. Do you have as much confidence in the unmanned satellites as you do in the Rimrunners?"

"Why not? They're simpler. Less to go wrong. And they're closer in, and moving slower, so they can be monitored from Earth."

"What if you had a malfunction and couldn't repair it?"

"Depends on the malfunction. If it was in the instruments, no problem. The Solomons would pick up anything that got past a rimrunner. They'd have less time and less data to work with, though. The odds in favor of the asteroid would improve."

"And if the Solomons failed, too?"

"The Paladins automatically destroy anything that reaches lunar orbit without clearance." Vanderhorst gave a little humorless laugh. "Tough if it happened to be a friendly alien."

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"What if all three systems failed?"

Vanderhorst shrugged. "You could pray. That's what they did in the old days, isn't it?"

"Do you believe in prayer?"

"Under those conditions, I'd pray whether I believed in it or not."

"Suppose there was another kind of malfunction, something in the ship itself?"

"Then I'd be the farthest traveler in the history of the human race."

Dalton nodded. "And what if Rimrunner Vanderhorst malfunctioned?"

"What are you reaching for, Senator?"

"Just suppose a rimrunner was awakened for an emergency and broke under the stress. What damage could he do? Could he reroute his ship, or relay false data?"

"Rimrunners don't break."

"Equipment does. Backup systems fail. So do people, more often than we like to admit. What's the worst possible damage a rimrunner could do? I want to know. I have to make decisions and recommendations, and I need data, not blind faith." When Vanderhorst did not reply, she went on, "Did you know that during your last circuit, two downside rimrunners committed crimes of violence and one tried to kill herself? The public hears these things and fears you."

"Then let the public go out there."

"Open up, Captain. You scorn the human race, and yet you go out time after time and risk your life to keep us safe." Dalton raised a hand to forestall objection. "Don't tell me you're doing it for the money. You're already one of the richest men in the world."

"I go out for Earth's sake. It's a beautiful planet, and I want it to be here when the human race has slobbered its way into extinction."

"There's rather less chance of that than there was a few generations ago. Things have improved."

"I haven't noticed. Every time I come down I'm disappointed. I keep telling myself I'll do one more run, and things will be better. They never are."

"The others feel almost exactly as you do. Every rimrunner spoke of loving the world and despising the people on it," Dalton said.

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"That's what makes us good rimrunners. We're not selected for our warm hearts. What difference does it make how we feel?"

"It makes a great difference. There's an unbridgeable gulf between the protectors and those they protect."

"There always has been, Senator. All the way back to my father's time, and probably a long time before that." They sat enshrouded in darkness and silence. Dalton made no reply. At last Vanderhorst stood and said, "Come inside. We can talk better if we can see each other."

Their footsteps resounded on the wooden deck. Vanderhorst entered the lodge, turned on the lights, and waved Dalton to a seat. "Tell me more about the others," he said.

"I should think you'd know them better than I do."

Vanderhorst shook his head. "We don't socialize, not even with other rimrunners. It's not in our natures. I knew only one rimrunner well. Moira trained with me. We planned to go out for three runs each, then settle down to enjoy our fortunes. She walked out on me and POP first time downside. If Moira's still alive, she's a hundred and two years old. And I'm thirty-four. Or a hundred and five, depending on how you calculate. Not your typical couple."

"Rimrunners aren't typical. That's why they make the public uneasy."

"The average citizen couldn't last ten days on a picket ship. That doesn't mean that those who can are freaks."

"I'm not saying you're freaks, Vanderhorst. I'm saying that you're different in a way that scares people. Take yourself, for example: born in a time of social unrest, your father a decorated hero in a war that many Americans condemned. Orphaned at seven and bounced around a dozen foster homes. Because of your work, you've become a man without roots. Except for a score of rimrunners, everyone else born in your time is dead."

"All true. But so what?"

"You're the living embodiment of two things the people of this time fear: violence and alienation. All our social analysts consider them the besetting sicknesses of the twentieth century and warn us that we've survived only because we've overcome them."

"You haven't overcome them. You've just learned to cover them over."

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"It may look that way to you, but violence is rare these days, and alienation afflicts only a small number. Yet the rimrunners — people we need, people we trust to be our first line of planetary defense — are living examples of these very ills."

"Why don't you just put us in quarantine? Send us up, but don't let us land."

"That's been suggested."

"This is the first I've heard. Spell it out for me."

"This is confidential, Captain. Understood? Absolutely confidential."

"Understood."

"Three years ago, a special commission recommended that rimrunner operations be moved to Luna IV and consolidated with the Solomon and Paladin complexes. A settlement was to be built especially for rimrunner personnel — "

"The ungrateful gutless bastards," Vanderhorst said, rising.

"The recommendation was soundly rejected. It's never come up again. I mention it only as a sign of the fears in some minds."

"Some minds. Descendants of the sons of bitches who spat at my father when he came back from a war they dodged." Vanderhorst sank back into his chair. He stared blankly ahead, his breathing audible in the silence. "I think you'd be smart to leave now," he said at last.

"I fought the recommendation, and helped defeat it. I'll fight it again, if it comes up."

Without moving, Vanderhorst said, "When I lock in from my next circuit, it will be 2107. You'll be in your eighties. Maybe you'll be dead. Which way will the vote go then?"

"You could stay down and work for the program."

"Surrounded by lobies who think I'm crazy? I'll go up, Senator."

"I'm sorry," Dalton said. She rose and left the lodge. A few minutes after her departure, Vanderhorst, in a hushed voice, said, "Thanks." He drew himself up out of the chair and poured himself a drink.

Shortly after one o'clock, bottle in hand, he made his way to the communications panel and punched in Korry and Jemma's personal code. The signal rang softly on, and he waited, and at last the screen glowed to life to reveal a sleepy Jemma.

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"Van! Are you all right?"

"You told Dalton. Let us think we're being left alone, but you're always looking, keeping an eye on us so we don't screw up your handout."

"Tell us where you are, Van, so we can help you."

"I don't want your help. I don't want anything to do with any of you."

Jemma's voice was low, taut with controlled urgency. "Van, tell us where you are. We'll come to you, and we'll work this out together. It's better that way. Trust us, Van."

Vanderhorst rubbed his eyes. When he looked again, he glimpsed Jemma's gesture to someone beyond screen range. At the sight of him, she reached out imploringly and said, "Please tell us, Van. Let us help you."

Without a word, he drew back his arm and with all his strength flung the bottle squarely into the screened image. He stood for a few minutes before the shattered panel, feeling a great satisfaction, then he turned and quickly gathered his few possessions.

EXCEPT FOR THE PALE green carpet, everything in the room was a cool restful blue. The colors, Vanderhorst had been told by smiling, earnest social assistants, would help him relax. He did not relax. They looked at him ruefully, spoke to him gently, and never stopped smiling.

On his second morning in the Assistance House, he began to wonder how long he would be staying. Unfailing smiles and bland words did not deceive him. He was a prisoner and he knew it. If alienation and violence were crimes in 2087, then he was a criminal. If they were illnesses, he was a patient. Whatever they chose to consider him, he was not free.

For the moment, he was content to leave the next move to his keepers. His lip was cut and swollen, and there was a painful lump on his temple. Whatever the authorities might think, there were still a few violent people left out there. His knuckles were heavily coated with curafilm, and he found it awkward and uncomfortable to flex his fingers. His memory was jumbled. He had drunk a great deal, roared against the human race, struck out at everyone who came within reach; that much he could remember. And now he was thoroughly disgusted with himself. He did not belong to this time, and never would.

A soft tone announced his morning meal. He rose from his bed,

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stretched, and went to the serving slot. The screen above the opening brightened at his approach, and a smiling young woman appeared, greeting him, "Good morning, Captain Vanderhorst. Did you sleep well?"

"I always sleep very well. It's a big part of my job."

"We want you to get back into proper condition. You've placed quite a strain on your body these past — "

"How about breakfast?" he broke in.

"Certainly, Captain. Do you feel more like talking with us today? We're very fortunate. The senior counselor is free all afternoon, and he's personally interested in offering you — "

"All I want from anyone here is breakfast. Do I get it?"

She took on the expression of a mother whose child has misbehaved and now revels in his misbehavior. "Captain Vanderhorst, if you tried to understand what we want to do for you, I'm sure you'd be glad to cooperate with us."

"I never cooperate on an empty stomach."

Each meal on that and the following days was served to a similar accompaniment of cajolery and gently expressed concern. Early in the evening of the fifth day, as Vanderhorst sat at his pale blue table, playing solitaire, his door opened. A husky junior social assistant stood in the opening. In one hand he held a small travel case.

"Will you come with me, please, Captain Vanderhorst?"

"Where are we going?"

"You've been cleared for re-entry in the mainstream. For your own sake, Captain, you ought to — "

"Just show me the way out."

To his surprise, the young man did so at once. Vanderhorst had anticipated a marathon of interviews and a final outpouring of solicitude by the entire staff of the Assistance House. Instead, he was led through pale blue corridors and down gentle ramps to a plain door. The junior social assistant handed him his travel case, opened the door, and said, "It was our pleasure to offer assistance, Captain Vanderhorst."

Vanderhorst did not reply. He was too surprised by the sight of Senator Dalton, standing by a private landroller.

"Did you get me out?" he asked.

"I spoke to a few people. Are you ready to go up again?"

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"Will I be allowed to land on Earth?"

"As long as I have any influence, you've got a home here. I hope you'll make less trouble next time, though," she said.

"I'll be a hundred and twenty-five when I get back. Maybe I'll be wiser."

"And I'll be eighty-one, as you reminded me. I'll be supporting you, but my support may not be as effective as it is now. Things could go against you and the program. You must know that."

Vanderhorst shrugged. "I wouldn't help the cause much if I stayed down. I'm not a good politician."

Dalton laughed. "That may be the greatest understatement I've ever heard. I guess we're all better off sticking with what we do best."

Vanderhorst settled into the comfort of the landroller. It left the Assistance Compound slowly, then dipped and locked into the exurban track and accelerated to cruising speed. Embankments rose on either side, blocking out the manmade world. The evening sky unrolled above, unobstructed and undefiled.

He believed that Dalton would keep her word and do her best, but he had no illusions and to his surprise, felt no concern. A home on Earth might be his by right, but Dalton's success or failure in assuring it hardly mattered now. There was no place here for Vanderhorst.

He loved the sight of this world, so bright against the blackness, so much easier to look at than to live on. On Luna, he could have the view without the complications. Gravity would be easier, too, and require no adjusting. He might even meet people he could talk to, and like, and live with in peace. He could be happy there.

He burst into sudden laughter, and Dalton looked at him curiously.

Grinning, he said, "I was thinking what my father would say if he knew that I was trusting my future to a politician."

He threw his head back and laughed for pure joy, feeling the tension and anger of downside drop away like a cast-off garment. The sky was a deeper blue now, and the first stars were out. Vanderhorst looked up and sighed with satisfaction. It was good to be heading home.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

Next month marks our forty-eighth anniversary, and we're going to celebrate it in grand style.

Returning to these pages after too long is a writer named Stephen King. Perhaps you've heard of him, or maybe you've read one or two of his many novels. However, I doubt you've encountered anything before like "Everything's Eventual," a tale of a young man whose uncommon power lands him a cushy job...but the job's perqs may not be all he thinks they are.

Returning after an even longer absence is the late Walter M. Miller, Jr., whose last appearance in this magazine was *many* moons ago. "God Is Thus" is a stand-alone excerpt from *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman*, the long-awaited sequel to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. The novel follows the life of Brother Blacktooth St. George, and the story details a crisis of faith the Brother faces in a small community, with some very unusual people.

Our former editor Kristine Kathryn Rusch also returns to these pages next month. She teamed up with Jerry Oltion (whose novella "Abandon in Place" is currently on the final Hugo Award ballot) to write "Deus X," a tremendous novella with some surprising answers to big questions about religion.

Other stories on tap for next month are two very different tales of love and friendship, "Paul and Me" by Michael Blumlein and "Transcendence" by Nancy Springer; a new tale by Lewis Shiner, our usual columns, and lots more. This issue is one you definitely won't want to miss. And in coming months we'll have new stories by David Bischoff, Sheila Finch, K. D. Wentworth, Mark McGarry and lots of other goodies. As they say in TV land, stay tuned.

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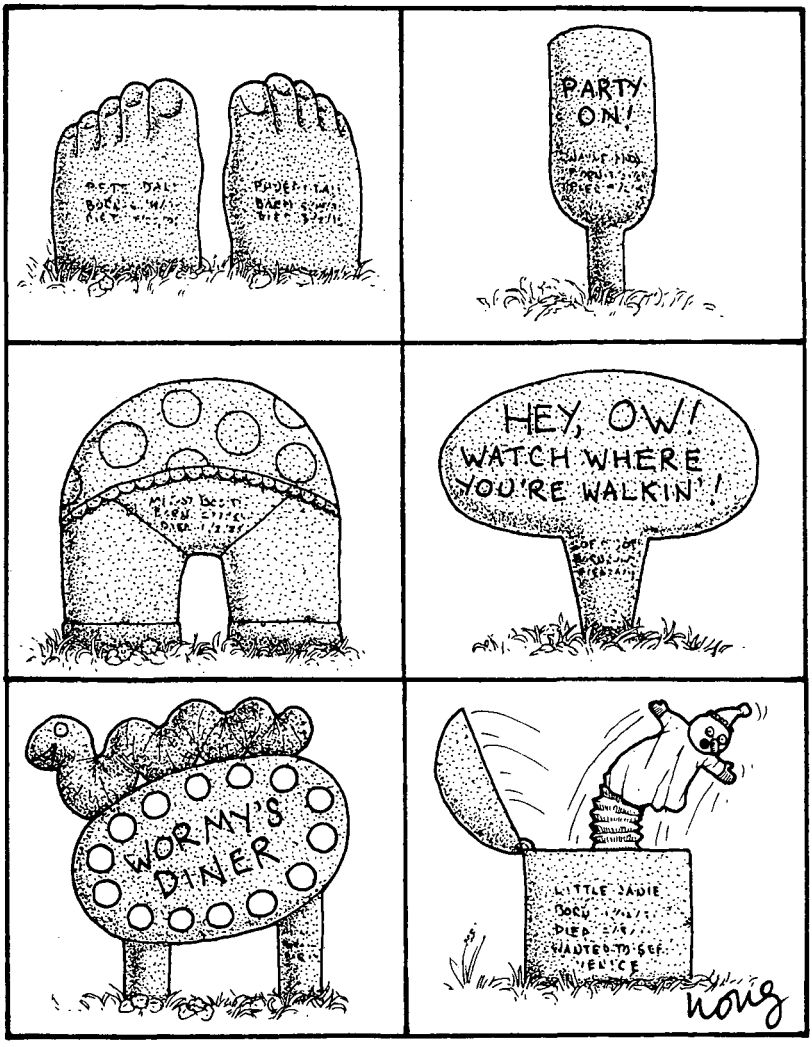

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